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BRIDGING THE GAP?

**An Exploratory Study of the Role of Ethnic
Community-Based Organizations in
Refugee Integration in the United States**

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Summary

Ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) have been critical actors in the U.S. resettlement system for three decades. Official thinking regarding their role has gradually evolved to imagine them as a third pillar of the resettlement system, filling vital gaps and connecting refugee communities to mainstream society. This vision is consistent with policies in other resettlement countries promoting the development of ECBOs as important actors in the integration of refugee communities. The findings presented in this study demonstrate, however, that, as in other resettlement countries, official rhetoric regarding the role of ECBOs contradicts reality. Although ECBOs in the U.S. often fill important gaps in service provision, they lack a well-defined role and are constrained by limited funding and structural barriers preventing them from engaging with mainstream society in a way that could lead to integration.

This study utilizes social capital theory to support this finding, arguing that if ECBOs were able to foster integration then they would have the capacity to facilitate the establishment of social capital within their communities. Limited in their ability to carry out this function, many ECBOs in the U.S. are stuck in a cycle of mediocre service provision. This study concludes that in order for ECBOs to facilitate integration, they must be equipped to be effective, sustainable organizations operating from a position that is not at the margins of society. Such a shift in the resettlement system requires not only greater funding, but also a new, more holistic approach to integration that encompasses much more than the current, short-sighted focus in the U.S. on achieving economic self-sufficiency. The U.S. resettlement program, which is currently at a crossroads, would benefit from careful reflection on ways to adopt such a holistic approach and how ECBOs might play a role in reshaping the program.

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Introduction

*Blia was the executive director of Lao Family Community, a mutual-assistance organization that helped Merced's Hmong community negotiate the public-assistance labyrinth, apply for job training, resolve community conflicts, and keep abreast of news from Laos and Thailand... [Blia explained,] "Let us say we need a hundred dollars to help out person who will be evicted. The seventeen district leaders carry the news, and everyone donate five cents or ten cents. Tomorrow we get that money. Or if one person die, tomorrow money will flow back to help that family. If there is a change in welfare rules, we get out information the same way. If someone have problem with their child, we can solve problem inside Hmong community before it gets to the police. This way, 6,000 people we can serve with four or five people in our office. No problem."*¹

This quote from *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Anne Fadiman's story of Hmong refugees living in California in the 1980s, presents a typical portrait of an ethnic community-based organization (ECBO) in a refugee community in the U.S. ECBOs are usually involved in activities similar to the ones mentioned above. They provide information and referral services, facilitate access to public services, liaise with authorities, satisfy basic needs, promote civic participation and serve as a way for community members to maintain contact with their home countries. Each ECBO is different, providing any number of these services or others. Some ECBOs are quite large, while others are small and have few, if any, paid staff.

Since the size and offerings of different ECBOs vary significantly, it is relatively difficult to generalize across all organizations. At the same time, there is a need for greater understanding of the impact of these organizations on their communities. This study explores this impact, and specifically analyzes the role of these organizations in the integration of the populations they serve. It accomplishes this by applying theoretical and empirical findings regarding the role of ECBOs in refugee integration from a variety of countries to what is happening in communities in the U.S. In this way, this study locates the U.S. experience within

¹ A. Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 246.

a wider body of knowledge while simultaneously recognizing the unique nature of the U.S. resettlement context.

Although much has been written about the role of ECBOs in integration, there is a dearth of information regarding refugee-serving ECBOs in the U.S. Studies of ECBOs in other resettlement countries are abundant. Yet, few recent studies have focused on these organizations in the U.S. Those studies that have focused specifically on refugee-serving ECBOs in the U.S. have emphasized what they *do* rather than their *impact* in terms of refugee integration.² Most studies have tended to focus on immigrant-serving ECBOs or have grouped refugee-serving ECBOs with these organizations.³ Studies of the role of ECBOs in immigrant integration in the U.S. have especially emphasized the ways in which these organizations have promoted civic engagement within ethnic communities and have focused less on other aspects of integration that are relevant to refugee communities, in addition to their political participation.⁴ While findings regarding immigrant-serving ECBOs can certainly inform what is known about refugee-serving ECBOs, it is interesting that in the U.S. there has been much less attention to the particularities of refugee-serving ECBOs than in other resettlement countries.

² See, for example, K. Newland, H. Tanaka and L. Barker, *Bridging Divides: The Role of Ethnic Community-Based Organizations in Refugee Integration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute; International Rescue Committee, 2007). This report specifically focuses on refugee-serving ECBOs. It provides a broad overview of how ECBOs contribute to their communities and interact with other stakeholders within the refugee resettlement system, but it does not go into depth regarding the impact of these organizations on their communities in terms of their ability to facilitate integration. There is not uncommon, as there is a lack of information on this topic in the U.S.

³ See, for example, the following studies that group immigrant- and refugee-serving ECBOs together: E. De Leon et al., *Community-Based Organizations and Immigrant Integration in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy, 2009); The Columbus Foundation, *Capacity Building Initiative for Immigrant and Refugee Organizations: Two-year Pilot Summative Evaluation* (Columbus, OH: The Columbus Foundation, 2008); D. Petsod, T. Wang and C. McGarvey, *Investment in Our Communities: Strategies for Immigrant Integration* (Sebastopol, CA: Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, 2006); E. Gantz McKay et al., *Immigrant and Refugee-Led Organizations and their Technical Assistance Needs: Report of a Study conducted for the Ford Foundation, Migrant and Refugee Rights Portfolio* (Washington, D.C.: MOSAICA: The Center for Nonprofit Development and Pluralism, 2001); E. Gantz McKay et al., *Research on Barriers and Opportunities for Increasing Leadership in Immigrant and Refugee Communities: Public Report* (Washington, D.C.: MOSAICA, 2000).

⁴ See, for example: A. Portes and R.G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006); I. Bloemraad, "The Limits of de Tocqueville: How Government Facilitates Organisational Capacity in Newcomer Communities," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31, no. 5 (2005): 865-887.

Differences between refugee- and immigrant-serving ECBOs in the U.S. arise from the very distinct systems with which such organizations interact. The Refugee Act of 1980 authorized a unique federal assistance program for resettled refugees.⁵ Most immigrants, particularly those who are present in the U.S. without legal authorization, are not eligible for the services and benefits provided within the resettlement system, which include public cash, medical and food assistance programs. Furthermore, the refugee resettlement program is based on a public-private partnership between the federal government and nonprofit organizations. This arrangement results in a considerable role for nonprofit organizations. The resettlement system, with its unique services and benefits and distinct structure, utilizes a welfare approach that is quite dissimilar from the federal government's approach to most immigrant populations.⁶

Another important factor that distinguishes refugee-serving ECBOs from immigrant-serving ECBOs is the differences in the experiences of refugees and immigrants themselves. Immigrants often arrive in the U.S. with social or other connections already established, frequently having decided voluntarily to migrate. Resettled refugees, on the other hand, generally arrive without assets and without many connections or plans. This distinction has been made repeatedly among scholars and practitioners, and is a critical one to consider when designing and assessing services provided to these groups.⁷ By the very nature of their communities, refugee-serving ECBOs are often tasked with meeting basic needs in a way that might not be true for many immigrant-serving ECBOs.

⁵ There are some other populations that are eligible for the same services and benefits as refugees through the resettlement program. These include asylees, certain Cuban or Haitian entrants or parolees, Amerasians from Vietnam, certified trafficking victims and Iraqi or Afghan Special Immigrants. Authorizations for Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)-funded services and benefits for these additional populations have been included in a variety of acts subsequent to the Refugee Act of 1980.

⁶ The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (INA), which is the primary legislation related to immigrants in the U.S., was amended to incorporate provisions of the Refugee Act of 1980. See Section 412 of the INA for more information regarding the domestic resettlement program.

⁷ See, for example: S. Gold, *Refugee Communities: A Comparative Field Study* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992), 17.

At the same time, it is important to avoid placing refugees and immigrants on opposite ends of a spectrum of preparedness. Some immigrants make thorough plans for their lives in the U.S., while others arrive without any connections at all. Moreover, many refugees come to the U.S. to join pre-established refugee communities, and may even have an easier time adjusting than some of their immigrant counterparts. The spectrum of voluntary to forced migration is a complicated one and generalizations about the differences between refugees and immigrants can be overstated. It is therefore important to consider the nature of the specific population served by any ECBO, as needs vary significantly from one community to another.

This study starts from an acknowledgement of the very distinct systems in which refugee- and immigrant-serving ECBOs operate. It is particularly important to take into account the unique nature of interactions between refugee-serving ECBOs and the resettlement system as a critical step toward understanding their role in integration. This study also recognizes differences between immigrants and refugees, although this is less of a factor in the context of this study. The underlying assumption of this study regarding the dissimilarities between refugee- and immigrant-serving ECBOs is not meant to imply that studies of immigrant-serving ECBOs are not useful. The significant information on immigrant-serving ECBOs in the U.S. context is important for understanding refugee-serving ECBOs, particularly given the lack of information regarding refugee-serving ECBOs. Rather, this study asserts that the considerable amount of information regarding refugee-serving ECBOs in other resettlement countries, coupled with an understanding of the historical development of the U.S. resettlement system, would add significantly to our knowledge of the role of ECBOs in refugee communities in the U.S. This study seeks to merge findings in these areas to develop a more nuanced assessment of these organizations.

Two research questions guide this study. The primary research question is: *What is the role of ECBOs in refugee integration in the U.S.?* In this study, integration is defined as

a dynamic, multidirectional process in which newcomers and the receiving communities work together intentionally, based on a shared commitment to tolerance and justice, to create a secure, welcoming, vibrant, and cohesive society.⁸

Answering this primary research question requires a deeper understanding of the integrative capacity of ECBOs. ECBOs are often quite knowledgeable about and trusted by the communities they serve because they are uniquely situated within them. They provide a number of useful services which may or may not be provided by other organizations in the surrounding community. Although there is no doubt that these organizations are carrying out a role, it is unclear whether this role contributes to the integration of their communities. Indeed, there is significant uncertainty among those who research and work with resettled refugees regarding the role of ECBOs. One prominent study of ECBOs argues,

While it is clear that [ECBOs] provide vital welfare services it is not clear how far they act to promote the long-term integration of refugees. [ECBOs] may play a part in the integration of refugees but this is quite likely not as central as is commonly assumed in the literature.⁹

The primary focus of this study is to critically assess such assumptions and empirical findings about ECBOs in order to determine whether they are currently facilitating or have the potential to facilitate refugee integration.

The secondary research question is: *What factors influence the ability of ECBOs to contribute to refugee integration?* Relating to the discussion above, this question asks, if ECBOs are not facilitating integration, what factors are causing this? Specifically, it is important when looking at the U.S. context to think about the unique aspects of the U.S. resettlement system that may affect the ways in which ECBOs function.

⁸ G. Brown, P. Gilbert and J. Losby, *Report of the Integration Working Group* (Washington, D.C.: ISED Solutions, 2007), 10. The rationale for the selection of this definition of integration is provided in Chapter II of this report.

⁹ D. Griffiths, N. Sigona and R. Zetter, *Refugee Community Organisations and Dispersal: Networks, Resources and Social Capital* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2005), 203-4.

Background and Relevance of the Study

These questions originated from my own work with ECBOs in refugee communities. When I began this research, I had recently started working at ISED Solutions, a federal technical assistance provider, on a project funded by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement's Ethnic Community Self-Help Program.¹⁰ The objective of the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program is "to support ethnic community based organizations in providing refugee populations with critical services to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society."¹¹ The project on which I work provides technical assistance to Somali Bantu refugee communities throughout the U.S. Much of the technical assistance we provide relates to helping these communities develop their own ECBO to meet community needs. As I began to work in these communities, I wondered to what extent the aims of our project fit with existing research on integration.

Preliminary research revealed considerable literature on the role of ECBOs in refugee integration in other resettlement countries, but there were few recent academic studies specifically looking at refugee-serving ECBOs in the U.S. The relative lack of information on this topic in the U.S. was surprising, given that ECBOs have been part of the resettlement system for more than three decades. There is, however, more research on refugee-serving ECBOs in the U.S. from the 1980s and early 1990s, following the massive waves of Southeast Asian resettlement. These initial findings begged the questions: Compared to other resettlement countries, why is there relatively minimal recent academic interest in refugee-serving ECBOs in the U.S.? Why did interest in such organizations fade, at least in academic circles?

¹⁰ The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), within the Department of Health and Human Services, is the primary federal actor in the resettlement system. Other departments with significant roles are the Department of State and Department of Homeland Security, which oversee overseas refugee processing. The Refugee Act of 1980 mandated the creation of ORR. More information on ORR can be found in the next chapter of this report.

¹¹ Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Ethnic Community Self-Help* (Program Description). (Accessed April 19, 2010); available from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/ethnic_comm_prg.htm

Additional research unearthed several recent studies of immigrant- and refugee-serving ECBOs by research institutes and capacity-building organizations.¹² There was not, however, a link between this research and the vast academic theoretical and empirical research on refugee-serving ECBOs in other countries as well as in the late 20th century U.S. context. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, studies of refugee- and immigrant-serving ECBOs often do not make clear the distinct position and challenges of refugee-serving organizations vis-à-vis their immigrant-serving peers. This study was therefore undertaken to attempt to fill this gap. My hope was that this research would enable me to locate our technical assistance project within these theoretical and empirical findings while simultaneously providing a space where findings from disparate studies could be merged.

This research is important for two reasons. First, much can be gained from applying lessons learned in other resettlement countries and in the early years of the U.S. resettlement system to the current U.S. context. The U.S. resettlement system, though the largest in the world, can benefit from reflection on best practices in any resettlement context. It is similarly important that U.S. policy makers and practitioners remain introspective, always placing current practices in the historical context of the U.S. resettlement program. This involves looking at the resettlement program of the 1980s and 1990s to identify areas of comparison and determine whether the current program reflects what we have learned over the course of thirty years.

Second, the U.S. resettlement program is at a crossroads. Practitioners have been outspoken about their dissatisfaction with the inadequate funding provided to resettlement programs. Many are frustrated that the program has been slow to adapt to refugee populations that are quite different from the Southeast Asians that were resettled thirty years ago. The inability of the system to appropriately meet refugee needs has become palpable since the

¹² See p. 2 of this report for a list of these studies.

economic recession. The unprecedented obstacles facing refugees in the U.S. have surfaced in the mainstream media, with particular attention given to Iraqis facing poverty and homelessness in large urban areas.¹³ Confronted with questions about the ability of the U.S. to continue its resettlement program in the wake of such findings, now is the time for policy makers and practitioners to decide whether current practices are working. It is within this context that it has become especially timely to examine the ways in which ECBOs contribute to the system. If the system begins to respond to the changing reality of refugee communities, these organizations might be expected to take on greater responsibilities.

Organization of the Report

This report begins with an overview of the current state of the U.S. resettlement system, with an eye to explaining its structure and objectives. Particular attention is given to an analysis of the Office of Refugee Resettlement's primary objective of promoting economic self-sufficiency through employment.

Chapter II introduces a framework for understanding the analysis of the resettlement system presented in the first chapter. Following a definition of integration, Ager and Strang's conceptual framework of integration is explored. A critical section of this chapter evaluates social capital theory as a lens for integration studies, and particularly as a way to understand the importance of social connections as a factor of integration.

Chapter III provides an overview of findings related to the role of ECBOs in refugee integration, utilizing social capital concepts to explore the normative and actual function of

¹³ See, for example, the following articles: K. Semple, "Iraqi Immigrants Face Lonely Struggle in U.S.," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2009, A1. (Accessed April 27, 2010); available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/13/nyregion/13iraqis.html?scp=1&sq=iraq%20AND%20refugee%20AND%20poverty&st=nyt>; O. Sacirbey, "Hard Times for Iraqi Newcomers," *Boston Globe*, April 19, 2010. (Accessed April 27, 2010); available from http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/04/19/hard_times_for_iraqi_refugees_living_around_boston/

ECBOs. This chapter also explores factors inhibiting ECBOs from contributing to the integration of their communities, including organizational and systemic challenges, with particular attention to structural barriers and the impact of the resettlement model on ECBO functionality.

Chapter IV analyzes the historical development of the role of ECBOs in the U.S. resettlement system. Current organizational and systemic challenges are reviewed. In the final chapter, these findings are discussed relative to the theoretical and empirical findings presented in the second and third chapters in order to answer the two research questions and locate the U.S. experience within a wider body of literature.

Methodological Limitations

This study attempts to merge limited findings regarding ECBOs in the U.S. with the relatively abundant literature on ECBOs elsewhere. Findings in the U.S. are drawn from studies generally conducted by nonprofit organizations, intended for use by other nonprofit organizations and decision makers. These studies are few in number and are not as methodologically rigorous as studies conducted in other countries, which have generally been published in peer-reviewed academic journals. The audience of these journals is usually other academics. This point is not meant to discredit the U.S. studies; the intention is rather to note that comparison between different resettlement contexts is made more complicated by these discrepancies in methodologies and intended audiences.

The critical limitation here is that the U.S. studies do not explore the impact of ECBOs in the way that studies conducted elsewhere do. Studies from academic journals tend to scrutinize findings relative to theory. This component is generally absent in the U.S. studies cited in this report. Indeed, the purpose of this study is to fill that gap between the limited empirical findings in the U.S. and the theory on integration that exists in the literature.

The method employed in this study was relatively successful in unearthing the major issues confronting both ECBOs and the resettlement system more generally. At the same time, due to the limited number of U.S. sources used and their relative lack of methodological rigor, the findings presented in this report can only be used to determine directions for further research, and not as evidence of the efficacy of any specific strategy moving forward.

I. The State of the U.S. Resettlement Program

With 74,654 refugees¹⁴ admitted for resettlement in FY 2009, the U.S. refugee resettlement program is the largest in the world.¹⁵ Each year, the President consults with Congress to determine refugee admissions for the subsequent fiscal year, in accordance with the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). Following a dramatic decline in refugee admissions in the wake of 9/11, the admissions ceiling has remained steady at 80,000 for the past three years.¹⁶ Current admissions are nevertheless significantly lower than that of the early 1980s, when annual admissions reached a high of 207,116 refugees in 1980, and the relatively lower admissions spike of the early 1990s.¹⁷

Today, the roughly 80,000 annual arrivals are resettled through a system of public-private partnerships. Nine national voluntary resettlement agencies, referred to as “Volags,” contract with the Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services.¹⁸ The Volags provide services along with states, ECBOs and other service providers.¹⁹ The public-private partnerships which characterize the current resettlement

¹⁴ This figure does not include refugees who were granted asylum in the U.S. (hereinafter “asylees”). This study does not differentiate between resettled refugees and asylees, as they are eligible for the same ORR-funded services and benefits and share many of the same challenges. Recognizing that asylees often have different experiences than resettled refugees, exploration of these differences is outside the scope of this study.

¹⁵ Current and past admissions figures are available through the Refugee Processing Center, operated by PRM. The Refugee Processing Center tracks and processes all U.S. refugee admissions. Refugee Processing Center, *Admissions Reports*. (Accessed April 19, 2010); available from <http://www.wrapsnet.org/Reports/AdmissionsArrivals/tabid/211/language/en-US/Default.aspx> (Hereinafter “Refugee Processing Center, ‘Admissions Reports’”)

¹⁶ Refugee Processing Center, “Admissions Reports.”

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Table 13: Refugee Arrivals: Fiscal Years 1980 to 2008,” *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2009). (Accessed April 19, 2010); available from <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk08RA.shtm>

¹⁸ The State of Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services was until recently considered a tenth provider along with the nine Volags, but it decided to discontinue its resettlement services in January 2010.

¹⁹ See the following report for a detailed description of ORR-administered programs and the role of states, Volags, ECBOs and other service providers in each program: P. Halpern, *Refugee Economic Self-Sufficiency: An Exploratory*

program have their roots in years of refugee assistance provided by private ethnic and religious organizations. Indeed, when the refugee admissions and resettlement programs were officially created in the Refugee Act of 1980, such partnerships were institutionalized as a central aspect of the program.²⁰

Although the public-private partnership structure of the resettlement program has for the most part remained unchanged since 1980, the nature of the refugee populations served is quite different from what it was thirty years ago. Whereas in the early years of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) the majority of refugees came from the former Soviet Union and Southeast Asia, refugees of over sixty nationalities—processed in approximately sixty-five countries—are resettled to the U.S. today.²¹ Refugees seeking to be resettled to the U.S. are divided into three categories of eligibility or “priorities” based on individual need for resettlement, membership in a group which has been designated for resettlement by the U.S. government or family reunification needs.²² In 2009, groups in the second category (“Priority 2” or “P2”) included the following: Burmese in Thai camps or Malaysia, Bhutanese in Nepal, Iranian religious minorities, Iraqis associated with the U.S. and Eritreans in Shimelba.²³ Refugees processed in the other categories can come from countries outside this list.

This study focuses on the resettlement period after arrival in the U.S. As mentioned previously, this period can be divided into two stages: first, the 30-day Reception and Placement (R&P) period, which is funded by PRM; and second, everything that is not considered R&P. All

Study of Approaches Used in Office of Refugee Resettlement Programs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

²⁰ See Section 412(b)(1)(A) of the INA for the legal basis for these public-private partnerships. Subsequent paragraphs of Section 412(b) provide details regarding private agency reporting and compliance requirements.

²¹ *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2010, Report to the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Homeland Security; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, ii). (Accessed April 19, 2010); available from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/129393.pdf> (Hereinafter (“*Proposed Refugee Admissions for FY 2010*”))

²² *Proposed Refugee Admissions for FY 2010*, 6. Note: Priority 3 (family reunification) processing was suspended in March 2008 because of fraud findings. Anchor relatives in the U.S. can petition for immediate family members through alternate routes.

²³ *Proposed Refugee Admissions for FY 2010*, 11.

federally-funded resettlement programs and services that are not part of the R&P Program are administered by ORR. The duration of resettlement assistance depends on the program and the type of assistance. Refugees who are not eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Medicaid programs are often enrolled in the Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA) Programs, which are administered by ORR.²⁴ Refugees can receive RCA and RMA benefits for up to eight months. Social services administered by ORR, including employment services, English language training, case management and social adjustment services, may be provided to refugees for up to five years. Finally, refugees are entitled to access services related to naturalization and referral and interpretation services through ORR-administered programs until they become citizens.²⁵

The variety of services and assistance programs offered to refugees indicates a resettlement system that provides extensive support to refugees. When placed in historical context, however, certain aspects of the system, particularly the cash and medical assistance programs, are relatively less generous than the system that was created in the Refugee Act. Whereas refugees today receive up to eight months of RCA and RMA benefits, prior to 1991 the period of coverage was significantly greater. The INA authorizes ORR to reimburse up to 36 months of RCA and RMA assistance, and ORR initially provided 36 months worth of

²⁴ TANF and Medicaid are federally-administered programs outside of the resettlement system that serve refugees and non-refugees alike. In order to receive TANF assistance, refugees must meet the same requirements as the general population. Requirements relate to income and family composition, and are determined at the state level. TANF assistance lasts much longer than cash assistance provided through the resettlement program, and so is generally preferred. It can last up to five years. There is no time limit for Medicaid as long as a family meets eligibility requirements, which are also determined by states; however, refugees who do not become citizens within seven years of their arrival are no longer eligible for Medicaid. See the Halpern (2008) report for more information on these programs.

²⁵ See the Halpern (2008) report for more information regarding these services and the duration of service provision for each program.

coverage. Appropriations gradually decreased throughout the 1980s and, in 1991, were decreased to the current 8-months worth of assistance.²⁶

Many practitioners have argued that current allocations are not nearly enough to provide refugees with the amount of assistance they need to start their new lives. The Volags have been outspoken about the inadequacy of the current system in meeting beneficiary needs. They have argued that current funding is insufficient in light of the fact that current refugee populations are particularly in need of assistance due to their specific vulnerabilities,²⁷ which have been compounded by the recession. A 2009 report by the International Rescue Committee, one of the Volags, highlighted the especially vulnerable state of Iraqi refugees resettled to the U.S. The report notes incidents of poverty and homelessness among this population and recommends that Congress allocate more funding to the refugee resettlement program.

Congress should appropriate more funds for the refugee resettlement program and extend the timeframe during which refugees are eligible for services. Refugees need greater amounts of cash and medical assistance and increased support from the resettlement agencies to secure employment and restart their lives.

For a federal government program, the resettlement program is dangerously under-funded. It would not function without private funds raised by the voluntary resettlement agencies that implement the program. While the public-private nature of the program has been its strength, the program as it is currently structured is not able to provide sufficient support to refugees in the present economic climate. Refugees should have the support they need to avoid homelessness and poverty.²⁸

This statement reveals the frustration experienced by the Volags, who have taken on an even greater burden in recent years as federal funding has not kept up with the needs of the

²⁶ B. Andorra. *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy, CRS Report for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2006), 10. (Accessed April 17, 2010); available from

<http://www.wrapsnet.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=dR%2FcVscHXNc%3D&tabid=180&mid=605&language=ar-IQ>

²⁷ The special vulnerabilities of current refugee populations are discussed later in this chapter.

²⁸ IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees, *Iraqi Refugees in the United States: In Dire Straits* (New York, NY: International Rescue Committee, 2009), 10. (Hereinafter: "IRC Commission, *Iraqi Refugees in the U.S.*")

communities they serve. They have had to raise an increasing proportion of funds to account for the gap in funding.²⁹

Recent changes to the R&P program indicate acknowledgement among some federal authorities of the inadequacies of current resettlement allocations. In January 2010, PRM announced that it had doubled the per capita R&P allowance from \$900 to \$1800. This means that during the first 30 days after a refugee's arrival, an additional \$900 is provided to assist with his or her initial resettlement needs. PRM acknowledged that the R&P per capita grant had decreased in real terms by 50 percent since the R&P program was created and that the "combined level of public and charitable resources available to the program is simply insufficient to do a quality job of initial resettlement."³⁰ The majority of the \$1800 grant must be provided directly to the refugee, although up to \$700 may be used by the Volag for administrative costs. PRM explained that refugees and Volags alike will benefit greatly from this increase, since it equips Volags to improve the quality of their services such as by, for example, lowering their client-to-staff ratios.³¹

This increase in R&P funding is a positive development for the resettlement program. At the same time, the Volags have advocated similar funding increases for ORR-administered programs serving refugees after the initial resettlement period, and have also pushed for a reform of the entire USRAP, including the domestic resettlement program. Refugee Council USA (RCUSA), a coalition of the Volags and other nonprofit organizations serving refugees in the U.S. and abroad, has argued that the program is antiquated. RCUSA explains that the

²⁹ Refugee Council USA, *The U.S. Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program at a Crossroads: Recommendations by Refugee Council USA* (Washington, D.C.: Refugee Council USA). (Accessed April 17, 2010); available from: <http://www.rcusa.org/uploads/pdfs/Final%20RCUSA%20USRP%20Reform.pdf> (Hereinafter: "RCUSA, *The U.S. Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program at a Crossroads*")

³⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Increase to the Refugee Reception and Placement Per Capita Grant: Fact Sheet*, January 25, 2010. (Accessed April 17, 2010); available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/01/135800.htm>

³¹ U.S. Department of State, *Increase to the Refugee Reception and Placement Per Capita Grant: Fact Sheet*.

USRAP was created in order to serve a relatively homogenous group of refugees and is no longer adequate for meeting the needs of a much more diverse population.³²

The Obama Administration has created a task force for assessing the current state of the resettlement program. The findings of this initiative remain unknown as of writing. In the meantime, calls for reform persist.

ORR's Mission: Integration or Economic Self-Sufficiency?

Those who advocate an overhaul of the resettlement program often argue that the push for economic self-sufficiency that motivates much of ORR's programming is out of touch with the reality of the populations ORR currently serves. Determining the degree to which economic self-sufficiency should continue to guide ORR programming lies at the center of the debate regarding the direction of the resettlement program. This section explores the current approach and considers its relevance to current populations.

ORR views itself as responsible for the integration of refugees, but much of its programming is oriented toward the achievement of economic self-sufficiency. While integration and economic self-sufficiency overlap in many ways, it is nevertheless important to distinguish between the two concepts. ORR's mission statement reads:

Founded on the belief that newly arriving populations have inherent capabilities when given opportunities, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provides people in need with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society.³³

Without a definition of what ORR means by integrated, it is difficult to discern what exactly ORR intends to achieve through its programming. A review of resettlement program descriptions reveals that achieving economic self-sufficiency is the critical objective emphasized in most programs. Indeed, there are few ORR programs with objectives that are not related to

³² RCUSA, *The U.S. Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program at a Crossroads*.

³³ Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Mission*. (Accessed April 19, 2010); available from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/about/mission.htm>

the achievement of economic self-sufficiency. A 2007 review of ORR programs conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services confirms,

The Refugee Act of 1980 clearly identifies economic self-sufficiency as one of the most important outcomes expected in refugee resettlement efforts, and this concern has driven the refugee resettlement movement and primary funding initiatives.³⁴

The review provides in-depth information on the majority of ORR's programs, most of which have objectives related to the promotion of economic self-sufficiency, often through employment or reduced public assistance usage.

The legislative mandate for this emphasis on economic self-sufficiency is clear. The INA states, "employable refugees should be placed on [sic] jobs as soon as possible after their arrival in the United States."³⁵ The INA further emphasizes that social service funds ought to be used for employment-related services and that the provision of cash assistance should be provided in a way "that does not discourage [refugee] economic self sufficiency."³⁶ These clauses, which form the basis for the resettlement program, explain the emphasis on economic self-sufficiency in ORR programs.

Many would argue that although it is certainly reasonable to include economic self-sufficiency as a central aim of any integration effort, the degree to which economic self-sufficiency has been emphasized in ORR programming may be inappropriate given the challenges current populations are facing. These challenges are related to the recession as well as to their own vulnerabilities. In regard to the first point, the FY 2011 budget justification report created by the Administration for Children and Families, of which ORR is a part, explains that refugee employment rates decreased from 54 percent in 2005 to 49 percent in

³⁴ Halpern, 4.

³⁵ Section 412 (a)(1)(B)(i) of the INA.

³⁶ Section 412 (a)(1)(A) of the INA.

2008.³⁷ As a result, refugees have been using RCA and RMA for longer periods of time.³⁸

Refugees have been particularly hard hit as a result of the recession, and are having a difficult time achieving economic self-sufficiency.

This problem is likely complicated by the fact that the current populations served within the resettlement program have exhibited greater needs than previous populations. The same budget justification report cites greater case management needs and significant difficulty achieving economic self-sufficiency among these populations, which include Burmese, Bhutanese and Burundians.³⁹ These groups have lived in refugee camps for many years and, according to the report, have few skills that would make them attractive in the U.S. labor market.⁴⁰

In its FY 2007 annual report to Congress, ORR similarly underscores a significant change in the employment outcomes of refugee populations, as compared to previous years when refugees were generally able to achieve economic self-sufficiency and most, but certainly not all, refugees eventually experienced upward mobility.⁴¹ That report points to a number of factors that may have contributed to the overall change in self-sufficiency outcomes, including lower educational attainment, lower English language abilities, lower labor force participation and lower wages.⁴² These discrepancies are attributed to the fact the refugee groups that have been arriving in recent years tend to exhibit relatively lower levels of education and literacy.⁴³ It is important to note, however, that despite these findings the report concludes that there is

³⁷ Administration for Children and Families, "Refugee and Entrant Assistance," in *Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees, FY 2011* (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), 228. (Hereinafter "Administration for Children and Families, *Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees*")

³⁸ Administration for Children and Families, *Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees*, 228.

³⁹ Administration for Children and Families, *Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees*, 241.

⁴⁰ Administration for Children and Families, *Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees*, 241.

⁴¹ Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Report to Congress: FY 2007* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), 94. (Accessed April 17, 2010); available from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/ORR_2007_report.pdf (Hereinafter "ORR, *Report to Congress: FY 2007*"). Note: This was the most recent annual report available.

⁴² ORR, *Report to Congress: FY 2007*, 94.

⁴³ ORR, *Report to Congress: FY 2007*, 69.

no reason to think that these lower outcomes will automatically preclude refugee families from ultimately becoming self-sufficient.

Not all refugees currently served in the resettlement program can be characterized as exhibiting limited abilities. Iraqis, for example, tend to be highly educated. One would assume that Iraqis would have an easier time finding employment, but recent evidence points to the contrary. In its report on Iraqi refugees in the U.S., the IRC acknowledges that although the entire U.S. population has struggled as a result of the recession, Iraqi refugees have had a particularly difficult time finding employment and overcoming poverty. The report explains that refugees are especially disadvantaged because the success of the resettlement program is so dependent on their demonstrating employment and self-sufficiency shortly after arrival.⁴⁴ The report recommends a review of the resettlement program to determine whether current objectives are feasible and appropriate. In regard to the relevance of economic self-sufficiency as a primary objective, the report states,

Immediate economic self-sufficiency for all refugees is an understandable goal, but not always the most appropriate or effective approach to sustainable integration. The U.S. resettlement program has tried to achieve that goal in a reactive manner that lacks strategy, flexibility and compassion.⁴⁵

The IRC's findings regarding Iraqis underscore an important concern put forward by refugee advocates in the U.S.: one of the shortcomings of programming that emphasizes economic self-sufficiency over other factors of integration is that it is extremely difficult for refugees to find adequate employment. Consequently, refugees in the U.S. are at an unfair disadvantage within a system that values early employment. The result is that refugees either remain dependent on public assistance or become stuck in jobs that inhibit their upward mobility. Neither of these outcomes contributes to integration. The U.S. resettlement program would, according to this argument, more appropriately align with its objective of

⁴⁴ IRC Commission, *Iraqi Refugees in the U.S.*, 7.

⁴⁵ IRC Commission, *Iraqi Refugees in the U.S.*, 11.

facilitating integration if it placed greater emphasis on other factors related to integration, in addition to the achievement of economic self-sufficiency through employment.

Employment as a Factor of Integration

It is difficult to argue that employment is not critical to refugee integration. It is frequently cited in academic literature as one of the most important factors leading to refugee integration, and governments and refugees alike consistently refer to employment as one of their main objectives in the resettlement process. In their conceptual framework of integration, which was the result of a project initially commissioned by the United Kingdom Home Office, Ager and Strang stress the importance of employment in promoting economic independence and self-reliance, in addition to facilitating contacts with host communities and providing opportunities for language learning and access to other services.⁴⁶ More generally, participation in the labor market facilitates participation in society. Unemployed refugees, on the other hand, are at risk of social exclusion.⁴⁷ In other words, since refugees' main source of contact with the host society is often through employment and the relationships developed at their place of employment, refugees lacking this source of contact are at a disadvantage.

Based on the literature, it is logical to include refugee employment as a central resettlement policy aim. It is nevertheless difficult for refugees to find employment, particularly in the current economic climate. Resettled refugees worldwide experience difficulty finding and maintaining employment at a level that could facilitate long-term economic self-sufficiency. Studies of refugee employment in other resettlement countries cite higher rates of

⁴⁶ A. Ager and A. Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21, no. 2 (2008): 170.

⁴⁷ K. Valtonen, "Resettlement of Middle Eastern Refugees in Finland: The Elusiveness of Integration," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11, no. 1 (1998): 44-5.

unemployment and underemployment among refugees compared to non-refugees.⁴⁸ The literature identifies the following impediments to initial employment or employment maintenance in countries of resettlement: lack of proficiency in the host language; structural and institutional issues such as unfamiliarity with the job market and the process of securing employment; non-recognition of qualifications and previous experience; lack of host country work experience; employers' concerns about legal status; and others.⁴⁹ In a climate with limited employment opportunities and heightened competition, many of these factors are exacerbated.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of education in finding decent employment. Language acquisition and vocational training are directly related to higher and more sustainable employment rates among refugees. Hyndman and McLean emphasize the value of official language skills in their study of Acehese refugees in Canada, where lacking language proficiency makes both economic and social aspects of integration more difficult.⁵⁰ Ager and Strang concur that positive employment outcomes among refugees can often be attributed to language and vocational education opportunities.⁵¹

Resettlement countries, including the U.S., currently provide opportunities for refugees to learn the host language and gain vocational skills. The literature stresses, however, that the impact of these programs on the ability of refugees to find adequate employment hinges on whether these programs are administered and resourced in such a way as to prepare them for the workforce. In the U.S., refugees are encouraged to pursue English language classes while at

⁴⁸ See, for example: Ager and Strang, 170; K. Valtonen, "From the Margin to the Mainstream: Conceptualizing Refugee Settlement Processes," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 17, no. 1 (2004): 78; V. Colic-Peisker and F. Tilbury, "Employment Niches for Recent Refugees: Segmented Labour Market in Twenty-first Century Australia," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2006): 205-7.

⁴⁹ See, for example: Ager and Strang, 170; J. Renaud et al, "'One's Bad and the Other One's Worse': Differences in Economic Integration Between Asylum Seekers and Refugees Selected Abroad," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 35, no. 2, (2003): 88; F. Tomlinson and S. Egan, "From Marginalization to (Dis)empowerment: Organizing training and employment services for refugees," *Human Relations*, 55, no. 8 (2002): 1025.

⁵⁰ J. Hyndman and J. McLean, "Settling Like a State: Acehese Refugees in Vancouver," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19, no. 3 (2006): 354.

⁵¹ Ager and Strang, 171.

the same time looking for employment or, preferably, while working. Findings suggest, however, that it is can be difficult for refugees to learn a language while seeking or maintaining employment. In their study of Somali Bantu refugees in Maine, Mamgain and Collins found that those respondents with the poorest language skills were often unable to attend language classes because they were too busy working.⁵² In this case, those with the lowest level of proficiency had to take jobs requiring limited or no knowledge of English, and these positions were often so physically demanding that they left them too exhausted to attend language classes.

The literature considers the viability of approaches that allow more time for language training, but such efforts have had mixed results. Despite one year of financial support and access to basic-level language classes, Acehnese refugees in Canada were still unable to find adequate employment.⁵³ In this case, refugees continued looking for jobs in spite of, or perhaps to supplement, the assistance they were receiving. Hyndman and McLean noted that for these refugees, “[s]pending the majority of their time in language training schools and relying on federal financial assistance offended their sense of pride and desire to be self-sufficient.”⁵⁴ Although the literature indicates that language training is an important factor in finding and maintaining employment, it leaves open the question of how exactly resettlement countries should structure their programs.

Toward a More Holistic Notion of Integration

The U.S. resettlement program currently emphasizes both employment and English language acquisition, reflecting best practices in resettlement countries. The push for economic self-sufficiency through employment nevertheless guides the resettlement program, and English language acquisition is often neglected as a result. In recent years, there has been growing

⁵² V. Mamgain and K. Collins, “Off the Boat, Now Off to Work: Refugees in the Labour Market in Portland, Maine,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 16, no. 2 (2003): 133.

⁵³ Hyndman and McLean, 355.

⁵⁴ Hyndman and McLean, 355.

recognition among practitioners that this over-emphasis on economic self-sufficiency may ultimately inhibit, or at least delay, integration. In response, ORR has commissioned an Integration Working Group to review integration literature and practices in the U.S. and provide recommendations for future programming. In its initial report, the Working Group found that,

[I]n addition to self-sufficiency as a major management focus, ORR can and must actively manage to achieve resettlement conditions that will intentionally support integration... In the way that ORR now tracks employment as an indicator of self-sufficiency, ORR will need to work with stakeholders to expand the set of indicators/outcomes to be tracked in order to better measure whether a resettlement site and its programs support a positive environment for integration.⁵⁵

The Working Group's final report has yet to be released. In the meantime, this statement indicates that there is a movement among those working with refugees to utilize a broader set of indicators for measuring integration.

The Working Group further explains that by using a more holistic notion of integration as a rubric for reviewing programs, ORR can restructure its programming to promote integration.⁵⁶ The report provides several recommendations for how ORR might accomplish this, one of which is the expansion of its discretionary programming. This recommendation is particularly important in the context of this study's exploration of the role of ECBOs because many ECBOs receive ORR funding through discretionary programming, and specifically through the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program. The report states,

The discretionary grants programs. . . may represent ORR's best opportunity to directly impact integration. Through these grants, ORR shapes local refugee services provided throughout the country, while impacting the policies of states, counties, ethnic community based organizations, and local voluntary agency affiliates. . . While it is true that many local refugee services are funded by states with money from ORR, these programs are generally targeted to basic services such as case management, refugee cash and medical assistance, employment services, and ESL and have less flexibility to support creative programming.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Brown, Gilbert and Losby, 10.

⁵⁶ Brown, Gilbert and Losby, 10.

⁵⁷ Brown, Gilbert and Losby, 12.

The underlying logic behind this statement is that by providing greater support to discretionary programs—and by association to ECBO programs supported through the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program—ORR will engender more creative programming that may have a direct impact on integration outcomes.

This statement reveals a critical assumption held by many practitioners in the U.S., which is that ECBOs will be a critical partner in efforts to reorient the resettlement program. Furthermore, such arguments also assume that ECBOs have the capacity to take on a more significant role. Funding provided to ECBOs through the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program was only approximately \$7 million out of ORR's \$587 million budget.⁵⁸ More funding would likely have to be allocated to discretionary programs, particularly the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program, to generate capacity within ECBOs.

The remaining chapters of this study explore the validity of the assumption that greater support of ECBOs would be a vital component of a more holistic approach to integration in the U.S. resettlement system. In the next chapter, we will define what is meant by integration and introduce a conceptual framework for understanding the factors of integration, ultimately setting the stage for our discussion of the role of ECBOs in integration in the U.S.

⁵⁸ Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Divisions: Community Resettlement; Divisions: Budget Policy and Data Analysis* (Accessed April 27, 2010); available from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/about/divisions.htm#4>

II. Theorizing Integration

There is a wealth of literature on the ways in which immigrants and refugees start new lives in receiving societies. This process is alternately referred to as integration, incorporation and assimilation. This study utilizes the term “integration,” reflecting growing consensus regarding terminology among scholars and practitioners working with refugees. Other terms such as “incorporation” may be equally useful. Indeed, in their in-depth analysis of migration policies and trends, Castles and Miller argue that although integration is the most commonly used term, they prefer to describe this process using the less prescriptive term “incorporation.”⁵⁹

The term “assimilation” has increasingly assumed a negative connotation, and is gradually becoming less accepted among those working with refugees. Castles and Miller explain that assimilation is understood as requiring that newcomers be incorporated into society through a one-sided adaptation process.⁶⁰ To assimilate, they argue, means to renounce one’s cultural identity in favor of the majority cultural identity. Some scholars have attempted to clarify that this is not necessarily the objective of assimilation, but the term continues to be criticized in certain circles.⁶¹ Integration eventually replaced assimilation as the preferred term. There remains some uncertainty about whether integration is the most appropriate policy objective because, as with assimilation, its end goal remains adjustment to the dominant culture—if not adoption of that culture—despite its emphasis on mutual accommodation of differences.⁶²

⁵⁹ S. Castles and M. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 4th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 245-6.

⁶⁰ Castles and Miller, 247.

⁶¹ R. Alba and V. Nee, “Chapter 3: Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration,” in *The New Immigration: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, ed. M. Suárez-Orozco, C. Suárez-Orozco and D. Qin-Hilliard (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 60.

⁶² Castles and Miller, 247.

Recognizing its shortcomings, integration remains the most appropriate term for the purposes of this study because it is the preferred term in academic literature on refugees in resettlement countries and is prevalent in policy and programmatic directives issued by ORR. It is also the focus of the Integration Working Group, the efforts of which are described in the previous chapter.

Although there is relative consensus on the use of the term integration, the literature is not unanimous on its definition. Ager and Strang stress the difficulty of defining integration, since it is a term that is commonly used but not often well-understood.⁶³ They further argue that a common framework of integration might be possible, but that definitions of integration will likely vary depending on the context.⁶⁴ For this reason, this study utilizes the definition of integration developed by the Integration Working Group. Upon careful reflection on factors associated with integration, the Working Group came up with the following definition:

Integration is a dynamic, multidirectional process in which newcomers and the receiving communities work together intentionally, based on a shared commitment to tolerance and justice, to create a secure, welcoming, vibrant, and cohesive society.⁶⁵

This definition encompasses the notion of a two-way, mutually accommodating process that is frequently cited in definitions of integration.

Based on this definition, refugee participation in receiving societies is not only the responsibility of the refugees themselves but also of the host community. Reflecting on her experiences working in Lowell, MA, where there has been an unusually large influx of immigrants and refugees in recent years, Silka remarks that each host community adjusts differently to newcomer populations based on a variety of factors. She draws attention to the

⁶³ Ager and Strang, 167.

⁶⁴ Ager and Strang, 185.

⁶⁵ Brown, Gilbert and Losby, 7.

need for a community-level understanding of what is happening in each receiving community.⁶⁶ Noting that some community actors naturally have more contact with newcomers than others, she advocates an approach in which communities make a concerted effort to brainstorm ways in which those with less exposure could increase their contact with newcomers.⁶⁷ In this way, she puts the onus on host communities to improve their participation in the integration process.

Integration remains a rather nebulous concept for refugees and host communities alike. It is difficult to imagine when a host community's efforts to promote cultural exchange and mutual understanding are sufficient. The literature highlights refugees' responsibility in this process. Many authors specifically note the importance of encouraging refugee participation in society and employment is often referenced as a critical venue for refugees to interact with the host community. Several authors also contend, however, that integration encompasses much more than the achievement of benchmarks such as employment and language acquisition. Integration likely requires other means of societal participation, such as social interactions. In order to gain a better sense of the various factors that facilitate such participation in society, we can locate our discussion within Ager and Strang's conceptual framework of integration.

A Conceptual Framework of Integration

Ager and Strang developed a conceptual framework of integration as a tool that could be used in a variety of contexts. It was created in the UK context, but it is applicable in any resettlement country because it acknowledges the variation that exists across resettlement contexts. The framework recognizes that integration requires more than the achievement of measurable outcomes, such as employment, education, housing and health. Ager and Strang

⁶⁶ L. Silka, "Finding Community in Studies of Host Community Acculturation," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 42 (2008): 367.

⁶⁷ Silka, 366.

suggest that these outcomes are “markers and means,” meaning that the achievement of one of them not only serves as an indicator of integration, but these outcomes are also a means to facilitate integration.⁶⁸ Despite their importance, however, Ager and Strang assert that these are only some of the factors of integration.

Several authors concur that it would be a mistake to focus only on measurable outcomes when determining whether a refugee is integrated. Korac argues that refugees’ own perceptions of whether they are integrated is equally important as the measures that are typically considered. Whereas governments frequently look only at objective factors when devising their resettlement systems, Korac argues that much of integration is subjective.⁶⁹ How a refugee views his or her own participation in society is one way to gauge the degree to which mutual exchange is actually occurring.

Ager and Strang similarly highlight the importance of subjectivity in their discussion of how the expectations held by a community affect whether refugees are defined as integrated in that context. They explain that in some communities they studied the mere absence of conflict was considered integration, whereas in the majority of communities an active “mixing” of people was required and some even identified refugees’ sense of belonging as the true indicator of integration.⁷⁰ Ager and Strang’s framework therefore recognizes such contextual factors, including the role of subjectivity, while also attempting to establish some sense of uniformity in the factors that contribute to integration in any context. Their framework is helpful for understanding one factor that is particularly relevant to this study: the role of social connections.

⁶⁸ Ager and Strang, 169.

⁶⁹ M. Korac, “Integration and How We Facilitate It: A Comparative Study of the Settlement Experiences of Refugees in Italy and the Netherlands,” *Sociology*, 37, no. 1 (2003): 52.

⁷⁰ Ager and Strang, 177-8.

Social Connections and Social Capital Theory

Many academics and practitioners agree that a refugee's ability to participate in society is dependent on the nature of his social networks. Indeed, recent recommendations issued by RCUSA regarding the U.S. resettlement program highlighted the fact that, although many Americans have experienced considerable difficulty finding employment in the current economic climate, refugees are at an even greater disadvantage due to their limited social networks.⁷¹ Ager and Strang agree that there are certain factors that affect the achievement of benchmarks such as employment, and that the presence of networks of "social connections" is one such factor.⁷² These mediating factors are represented separately from the more objective factors within the conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

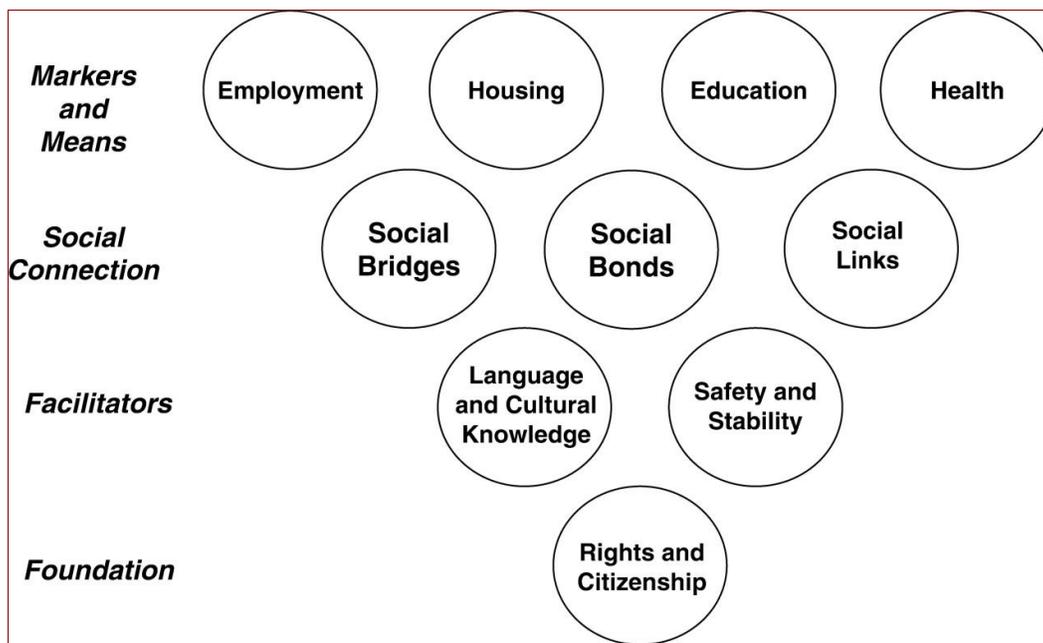


Figure 1: Ager and Strang's Conceptual Framework of Integration⁷³

⁷¹ RCUSA, *The U.S. Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program at a Crossroads*.

⁷² Ager and Strang, 177.

⁷³ Ager and Strang, 170.

It is important to note that, although the development of social connections is not specifically referenced in the definition of integration utilized in this study, the assumption supporting the inclusion of social connections as a factor of integration is that, because integration is defined in part as a process in which newcomer and receiving populations work together, the establishment of social connections facilitates this interaction.

A “social connection” is not well-defined within the framework, possibly because its meaning varies depending on the context. As mentioned previously, whereas in some contexts simple interactions might be considered social connections, in others deep friendships and mutual respect would be required.⁷⁴ Locating “social connection” as a concept within social capital theory helps to decipher what exactly is meant when this term is used.

Social capital theory has been extremely influential in the study of immigrant and refugee integration. Although Putnam was not the first to theorize social capital, his work has been particularly influential. He defines social capital as “features of social life—networks, norms and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.”⁷⁵ In their comprehensive work on ECBOs, Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter acknowledge the utility of social capital theory as a way to understand integration, while also highlighting its inadequacies. They point out that social capital theory has failed to consider the power dynamics that affect the ability of certain communities to take advantage of the positive effects that typically result from the development of social capital.⁷⁶ Specifically, they argue that structural barriers often prevent refugee communities from capitalizing on the social capital that they undoubtedly possess. In order for social capital theory to be used properly in regard to refugee communities, they assert, it must take these barriers into account.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ager and Strang, 177-178.

⁷⁵ R. Putnam, “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America,” *The American Prospect*, 7, no. 24 (1996): 34.

⁷⁶ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 32-4.

⁷⁷ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 207.

Promoting social capital in refugee communities without considering the structural barriers they face might actually harm them. Jennings concurs with Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, and explains that social capital has been used in the U.S. as a way for the government to abdicate its responsibility to provide effective assistance to immigrant populations.⁷⁸ The problem he alludes to is that if there are structural barriers in place preventing communities from utilizing their social capital, then that social capital is not going to help them. The government should aid such communities so that their social capital is useful.

More recent works on social capital have attempted to reconcile the challenges of applying social capital theory to newcomer communities—particularly in regard to power dynamics—by differentiating between three types of social capital: bonding social capital, bridging social capital and linking social capital. Linking social capital, in particular, aims to address power dynamics by providing a way to analyze relationships between communities and those in power.⁷⁹ These three categories of social capital are presented separately within Ager and Strang’s conceptual framework, acknowledging their very different origins and contributions.

Bonding social capital refers to intra-community connections, such as those within the same and similar ethnic groups.⁸⁰ Bridging social capital refers to connections with the wider community. The establishment of this type of social capital requires that newcomer and host communities develop involved relationships.⁸¹ Finally, linking social capital involves connecting newcomer communities with the government, and particularly with government services. The

⁷⁸ J. Jennings, “Introduction,” in *Race, Neighborhoods, and the Misuse of Social Capital*, ed J. Jennings (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.

⁷⁹ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 33.

⁸⁰ Ager and Strang, 178.

⁸¹ Ager and Strang, 180.

result of the existence of linking capital is equality of access to services provided by the government.⁸²

Although ECBOs are critical for maintaining bonds within newcomer communities by, for example, promoting the maintenance of cultural activities,⁸³ this study focuses on the role of ECBOs in facilitating the two other forms of social capital: bridging and linking social capital. This is because the relationship between newcomer and host communities and the level of equality newcomers have in regard to accessing government services are critical aspects of the “secure, welcoming, vibrant, and cohesive society” that is the result of integration.⁸⁴ In the next chapter, we explore findings regarding ECBOs in the literature on refugee integration—specifically looking at their role in building bridging and linking social capital—in preparation for our subsequent analysis of ECBOs in the U.S.

⁸² Ager and Strang, 181.

⁸³ Ager and Strang, 178.

⁸⁴ Ager and Strang, 181. These points are discussed in greater depth in the discussion chapter of this report. The quoted section here refers to the Integration Working Group’s definition of integration referenced earlier in this chapter.

III. ECBOs and Integration

Discussion of the contributions of ECBOs to refugee communities has become increasingly prevalent in academic studies of integration, yet few studies define what an ECBO is. Indeed, different terminology is used depending on the author of the study. The following labels are used interchangeably: refugee community organization (RCO), mutual assistance association (MAA), ethnic organization, self-help organization, community-based organization, civic association, and so on. In the U.S. ECBOs have often been referred to as MAAs. This term is still used, although “ECBO” is the more common term.

Whether an organization can be considered an ECBO depends not on the terminology used but on the nature of the organization. The definition provided by Zetter and Pearl provides the clearest and most succinct definition of an ECBO in the context of a refugee community:

organisations rooted within, and supported by, the ethnic or national refugee/asylum seeker communities they serve. Essentially, these RCOs are established by the refugees and asylum seekers themselves—or by their pre-established communities.⁸⁵

Beyond the basic components included in Zetter and Pearl’s definition, ECBOs come in many different forms. Van Arsdale’s study of ECBOs in Colorado in the 1980s clarifies:

A review of the literature suggests that no common structural nor functional themes pervade these organizations, other than the stated purpose of helping the disadvantaged, needy, or displaced of their own ethnic group. Indeed, even the stated purpose often is skirted or neglected.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ R. Zetter and M. Pearl, “The Minority within the Minority: Refugee Community-Based Organisations in the UK and the Impact of Restrictionism on Asylum-Seekers,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 26, no. 4 (2007): 676. Note: Although Zetter and Pearl use the term RCO because they are referring to organizations in the UK, this definition is no different from that which applies to an ECBO in the American context.

⁸⁶ P. Van Arsdale, *The Role of Mutual Assistance Associations in Refugee Acculturation, Identity Maintenance and Mental Health*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, New Orleans, LA, November/December 1990. (Denver, CO: Peter W. Van Arsdale, 1990), 3.

In other words, since each ECBO operates in a different environment, possesses its own resources and develops its own objectives, the only uniform component of every ECBO is that it serves its own ethnic community.⁸⁷ Acknowledging the diverse nature of these organizations, there are many positive functions that are regularly associated with ECBOs, including: community empowerment and representation; triage to basic needs; mediation and gap-filling vis-à-vis service providers; networking; providing employment.⁸⁸ Of course, ECBOs perform a variety of other functions, some of which overlap with the functions of mainstream resettlement agencies—e.g. job placement and referral services, language instruction and cultural orientation—to varied degrees of success. Understanding the complexity and variation among ECBOs is the first step in theorizing their role in refugee integration.

Many studies have emphasized the important relationship ECBOs have with the communities they serve. Breton's influential article on the institutionalization of ethnic communities draws a clear correlation between ECBOs and integration. Drawing on the same assumptions as social capital theory, Breton identifies social relations as a critical factor of integration, and argues that whether immigrants can establish social networks (or "social connections" in Ager and Strang's framework) is related to the degree to which an ethnic community is institutionalized.⁸⁹ Majka and Mullan place Breton within the ethnic solidarity school, which emphasizes the role of the ethnic community, and particularly its organizational capacity, in facilitating integration.⁹⁰

Arguments in favor of the integrative role of ECBOs have started from the vantage point of this school of thought. Such theories are rooted in the evolution of thinking around

⁸⁷ This does not preclude such organizations from serving ethnic communities beyond their own. Many ECBOs do this as they grow in size and resources. In the U.S. and other contexts, another shared attribute is certification as a non-profit organization for tax and funding purposes.

⁸⁸ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 20.

⁸⁹ R. Breton, "Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 70, no. 2 (1964): 202.

⁹⁰ L. Majka and B. Mullan, "Ethnic Communities and Ethnic Organizations Reconsidered: South-East Asians and Eastern Europeans in Chicago," *International Migration*, 40, no. 2 (2002): 72.

acculturation that occurred in the twentieth century. Gold explains that whereas it was previously thought that ethnic ties should become less important as immigrants adjust to new environments, modern host societies—which are increasingly multicultural in their policies—not only accept but in many cases encourage ethnic solidarity as a means of expressing interests.⁹¹ It is in this context that ethnic collectivism came to be viewed as a critical factor of integration.

The positive view of ECBOs has extended beyond academia to government institutions. Nowhere has this been more evident than in Canada, where policies espousing multiculturalism took hold in the 1970s. Canada's multicultural policies promote interaction between ethnic groups and the host society by encouraging the formation and institutionalization of ethnic communities. Berry explains that this policy is grounded in the “multicultural assumption,” which asserts that group formation will instill a sense of confidence in community members, which in turn will lead to acceptance and tolerance of the group by other groups.⁹² Confidence should not be mistaken for self-glorification, which would undermine the multicultural approach. Berry clarifies that this is why inter-group sharing and interaction is critical to such policies because they allow for the discovery of common ground, while still recognizing the distinct character of each group and preventing ethnocentrism.⁹³ The promotion of ECBO development in many resettlement countries as a way to foster this type of mutual understanding is easily understood when placed in the context of the multicultural assumption.

Tomlinson and Egan stress the significance of relatively recent official recognition in the UK of the role of ECBOs in empowering refugees and acting as liaisons between refugees and host communities. These official characterizations represent a positive “discursive shift away from the identification of refugees as needy, helpless and dependent towards ‘empowered’

⁹¹ Gold, 15-16.

⁹² J.W. Berry, “Multicultural Policy in Canada: A social psychological analysis,” *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Sciences*, 16, no. 4 (1984): 363.

⁹³ Berry, 364.

capable and involved.”⁹⁴ Based on her comparison of Somali organizations in London and Toronto, Hopkins adds that, although ECBOs are only one part of the intricate systems serving refugees in these cities, they serve a distinct role in helping to rebuild community and provide a stable venue for refugees to develop social connections.⁹⁵ Evident throughout the literature is the finding that ECBOs serve a critical role in building and empowering refugee communities which was not acknowledged until recent decades.

One attribute that contributes to this role is the ability of ECBOs to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services. In her comparative study of resettlement experiences in Finland and Canada, Valtonen points out that it is particularly important to provide culturally appropriate services in situations where community involvement in private life is preferred over state intervention.⁹⁶ Given that refugee communities are often more comfortable receiving services from ECBOs than from the government or government-affiliated organizations, ECBOs are able to reach their communities in a way that differs from mainstream institutions.

Much of the literature further suggests that by providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services, ECBOs facilitate greater understanding of the host society within refugee communities. Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter agree that ECBOs are often thought of as “modes of adaptation to new social relationships and norms.”⁹⁷ There is a widespread assumption in the literature that, because ECBOs occupy this position, they facilitate social connections and, ultimately, integration. Some have questioned the validity of this assumption. The question of whether ECBOs really are a way for refugee communities to establish social connections that lead to bridging and linking social capital is critical for the purposes of this study.

⁹⁴ Tomlinson and Egan, 1027.

⁹⁵ G. Hopkins, “Somali Community Organizations in London and Toronto: Collaboration and Effectiveness,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19, no. 3 (2006): 362.

⁹⁶ K. Valtonen, “The Societal Participation of Vietnamese Refugees: Case studies in Finland and Canada,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 25, no. 3 (1999): 486.

⁹⁷ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 13.

Although it is difficult to establish whether ECBOs are actually building social capital within the communities they serve, the evidence suggests that ECBO contributions certainly extend beyond liaising. Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter assert that by serving as a bridge between their communities and mainstream institutions, they help their communities understand the systems of the receiving society.⁹⁸ (Here it is important to note that these authors use the term “bridge” to mean what is essentially referred to as linking social capital earlier in this analysis.) Despite this very positive contribution, Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter caution against oversimplification of the integrative ability of ECBOs. Given the variety of capacities ECBOs can have, they argue, it would be unwise to assume that ECBOs are automatically building social capital in their communities. They instead advocate a more nuanced understanding of their role.

The reason ECBOs may not necessarily fill this role is because of the resettlement systems in which they operate. These systems frequently operate on a different understanding of integration than what is depicted in the literature. As previously discussed, although integration has generally been acknowledged as a long-term, complex and multi-directional process, a largely “pragmatic understanding of integration”—valuing quantifiable measures such as job placement over more qualitative factors such as refugee perceptions—currently dominates in the resettlement context.⁹⁹ ECBOs are part of this system, and so they perform what Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter term “defensive” functions: filling in gaps; meeting basic needs.

In order to actually build the type of social connections necessary for integration (i.e. those that result from the establishment of bridging and linking social capital), ECBOs would have to have the capacity to help their communities engage with the wider society and mainstream institutions on a much deeper level than they are currently able to do.¹⁰⁰ The

⁹⁸ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 200.

⁹⁹ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 200.

¹⁰⁰ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 201.

authors argue that their ability to accomplish this is currently limited given the structural barriers that they face within these systems.

Before exploring these barriers further, it is important to note that ECBOs face many organizational challenges aside from these barriers. These include limited financial resources and staff capacity. These challenges relate to how ECBOs are funded and therefore to their larger systemic barriers, so they will be discussed in the next section. ECBOs face one additional limitation that must be addressed: divisions within the ethnic communities they serve. These divisions, which are documented widely in the literature, sometimes cause ECBOs to be fragmented as well. This fragmentation can affect the ability of ECBOs to adequately serve their communities.

The literature indicates that divisions within the community usually have to do with home country politics or prior affiliations, such as with a clan or other group, in the country of origin. Such divisions are often the reason for flight in the first place, and continue to inhibit the community in exile.¹⁰¹ Griffiths explores the impact of such divisiveness in his comparison of Somali and Kurdish ECBOs in London. Whereas the Kurds benefited from their common search for national recognition, the fragmentation and factionalism experienced in their home state impacted their ability to act cohesively. Griffiths also contributes their inability to come together to their inexperience in organizing, which he said led them to fall back on old allegiances, as well as to the lack of a local ethnic economy.¹⁰²

Wahlbeck also studied Kurdish refugees in London and was surprised by their ability to organize around politics rather than around religion. He cites religion and kinship as being common mobilizing forces for ECBOs.¹⁰³ In this case, however, the Kurds were able to

¹⁰¹ O. Wahlbeck, "Community Work and Exile Politics: Kurdish Refugee Associations in London," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11, no. 3 (1998): 215.

¹⁰² D. Griffiths, "Fragmentation and Consolidation: the Contrasting Cases of Somali and Kurdish Refugees in London," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 13, no. 3 (2000): 294-5.

¹⁰³ Wahlbeck, 224.

organize despite political divisions that existed. Wahlbeck admits that the communities were highly politicized, yet remarks that “just as politicization divides the Kurds, it can also be a powerful mobilizing force for smaller groups within the wider community.”¹⁰⁴ While political divisions often hinder the development of community organizations, in this case they facilitated it.

The fact that intra-community divisiveness affects some refugee communities more than others may have to do with the presence of ECBOs themselves in a given resettlement context. Reflecting on Griffiths’ findings regarding Somali tensions in London, Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter conclude that the proliferation of Somali organizations actually exacerbated tensions. The establishment of formal ECBOs institutionalized networks which had developed within Somali communities and, because these networks were divided along tribal lines, this process further solidified allegiances to particular tribes.¹⁰⁵ This factor demonstrates the complexity of refugee communities and the danger of oversimplifying intra-community divisions as a challenge that ECBOs face.

Structural Barriers and the Role of the Resettlement Model

As discussed previously, ECBOs are often thwarted in their efforts to build social connections—and therefore facilitate integration—within their communities by the structural barriers they face. Several authors attribute these barriers to the nature of the resettlement systems in which ECBOs operate. This section explores these systems in order to further develop this argument.

Many countries have increasingly relied on ECBOs as an integral component of their resettlement systems, although some to a greater degree than others. Hopkins notes that most refugee services in the UK and Canada are provided by nonprofit organizations, often

¹⁰⁴ Wahlbeck, 225.

¹⁰⁵ Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter, 89.

ECBOs. She attributes this to a shift in responsibility in the 1990s from state welfare programs to organizations operating on the community level. That shift was couched in the belief that refugees are better served by groups that are more in touch with their needs. Hopkins argues, however, that this shift lacked accompanying funding.¹⁰⁶ She refers to this as a “shift to a diminished service,” a phenomenon also mentioned in Zetter and Pearl’s work. In their study, Zetter and Pearl found that the UK Home Office transitioned responsibilities to ECBOs in the context of its dispersal policy, but did not provide those organizations with adequate financial or capacity-building support.¹⁰⁷ The lack of resources experienced by many ECBOs is critical to understanding their capabilities within systems that increasingly rely on them.

Adding to the literature on government support of ECBOs, Bloemraad compares Vietnamese and Portuguese ECBOs in Canada and the U.S. She ultimately finds that where the governments provided financial and symbolic support, ECBOs thrived. For example, federal funding played a significant role in the development of the Vietnamese American Civic Association (VACA) in Boston.¹⁰⁸ VACA was able to expand its services due to government backing. Bloemraad concludes that the considerable support of refugee-serving ECBOs in the U.S.—unlike the rather minimal support provided to immigrant-serving organizations—can be compared to the support provided within the Canadian system.¹⁰⁹

All of these findings indicate that the relationship between ECBOs and the state is a critical factor that determines their effectiveness in terms of facilitating the sort of bridging and linking social capital that could contribute to integration. The central problem in this relationship is that ECBOs are under-resourced to be able to handle their increasing responsibilities, despite the added value they likely bring to the resettlement systems in which they operate. Across several resettlement contexts, particularly in the UK and Canada, several

¹⁰⁶ Hopkins, 367.

¹⁰⁷ Zetter and Pearl, 692.

¹⁰⁸ Bloemraad, 873.

¹⁰⁹ Bloemraad, 881.

authors point to inconsistent messages sent by the state in regard to the importance of ECBOs. Tomlinson and Egan stress findings that suggest a contradiction between official rhetoric touting the role of ECBOs in fostering community development and the constraints facing ECBOs in carrying out that role.¹¹⁰ Zetter and Pearl agree that due to both structural barriers and their own institutional limitations, ECBOs, “like the communities they serve, will remain on the margins.”¹¹¹ Unless ECBOs are able to address the obstacles they are facing, they will likely remain unable to bridge the gap that exists between refugee communities and mainstream societies.

Some authors have suggested that as a result of this situation ECBOs might not add much more to their communities than the informal networks refugees build on their own. Based on her research on informal networks among refugees in Italy, Korac concludes that although refugees in Italy are disadvantaged in many ways by their lack of official support, one advantage to this system is that in the absence of government-supported ECBOs and other organizations, refugees were forced negotiate their own social connections through cross-ethnic networking as a matter of survival.¹¹² Korac recognizes that this is an isolated situation and that, in the absence of ECBO presence, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding their relative advantages and disadvantages.

The Italian model provokes a discussion of the relative benefits of various resettlement systems. Whereas the Italian government is hands off in its approach, most other resettlement countries are much more proactive. Korac contrasts the laissez-faire Italian system with the welfare model embraced in the Netherlands and finds that, while the Dutch system satisfies initial basic needs to a much greater extent than in Italy, the top-down approach in the Netherlands stifled integration by precluding refugees from branching out. Despite their

¹¹⁰ Tomlinson and Egan, 1038.

¹¹¹ Zetter and Pearl, 676.

¹¹² M. Korac, “The Lack of Integration Policy and Experiences of Settlement: A Case Study of Refugees in Rome,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 16, no. 4 (2003): 411-412.

significant struggles, Korac suggests that the likelihood of social capital formation and long-term integration is greater in Italy than in the Netherlands, where the government espouses a multicultural policy and encourages participation in ECBO activities.¹¹³ This suggests that the promotion of ECBOs within a welfare approach actually inhibits the formation of social capital when compared with a more laissez-faire system.

Studies of other welfare models add more layers to this discussion than what is apparent from Korac's research. In her comparison of the welfare approaches to Vietnamese refugees in Finland and Canada, Valtonen agrees that the top-down approach of welfare states can prevent full participation of refugee communities in the host society. She does not, however, equate this trend with all welfare approaches. Her findings indicate that the specific structure of the system is directly related to the integrative capacity of the welfare approach. Whereas in Finland refugees experience a delay in engaging with civil society because resettlement services are all provided within the public sector, the Canadian government encourages and funds immediate engagement with a complex system of public agencies, nonprofit organizations and ECBOs. Within the Canadian system, "the resettling person is more directly responsible for his/her own orientation and must develop social capital in the process."¹¹⁴ Valtonen concludes that, although Finland and Canada are both considered welfare states, these very different approaches may lead to dependency in the former and empowerment in the latter.

These findings indicate that whether a refugee community remains on the margins of society likely relates to a number of factors, one of which is certainly the degree to which the resettlement system promotes the formation of social connections. These studies are nonetheless inconclusive regarding the best approach, as Canada, for example, is viewed as empowering by some and limiting by others. Similarly, while Korac's findings imply that

¹¹³ Korac, "Integration and How We Facilitate It," 60-62.

¹¹⁴ Valtonen (1999), 483.

informal networks are the best way to build social capital, several authors instead point to the value of ECBOs in actively promoting social connections. Contradictions between these studies underscore the complexity of resettlement systems and demonstrate the need for thorough exploration of any given resettlement system to determine the best approach.

Turning to the U.S., we will look at how the federal government's approach to the role of ECBOs has shifted gradually in recent decades and assess the effectiveness of the current approach in light of the organizational and structural barriers ECBOs face.

IV. ECBOs in the U.S. Resettlement System

There is a long history of collaboration between the U.S. federal government and ECBOs in the resettlement system. Approximately five hundred Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs), as ECBOs have been called in the U.S., were founded between 1975 and 1980 to provide Southeast Asian refugees with cultural and social support services.¹¹⁵ An Indochinese Mutual Assistance Division was created within the federal government in order to liaise with and provide technical assistance to these MAAs. After ORR was established in 1980, it directly funded twenty-two MAAs.¹¹⁶

In 1982, ORR began providing MAA Incentive Grants to selected states in amounts ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000.¹¹⁷ The objective of the program was to incentivize states to utilize MAAs as formal resettlement service providers and build their organizational capacity, with the ultimate objective of encouraging states to secure funding for MAAs from sources other than the Incentive Grants.¹¹⁸ The initial grant announcement states,

MAAs have demonstrated several areas of competence and expertise in the delivery of services. Their participation in the delivery of services may lead to long and short term efficiencies. The effective involvement of self-help groups has been associated with the key resettlement services of employment, cultural orientation and related activities which lead to self-sufficiency. This program will provide opportunities for MAA leaders and staff to demonstrate management and service delivery competence.¹¹⁹

Through this program, MAAs were given the opportunity to play a primary function in the resettlement system, as providers of core services promoting refugee self-sufficiency. The stated hope was that by increasing their financial and organizational sustainability, MAAs would

¹¹⁵ Lewin and Associates, Inc., Refugee Policy Group, and Berkeley Planning Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative: Final Report* (Lewin and Associates, Inc.; Refugee Policy Group; Berkeley Planning Associates, 1986), 1.1. (Hereinafter “Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*”)

¹¹⁶ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 1.2.

¹¹⁷ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 2.4.

¹¹⁸ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 2.

¹¹⁹ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, Appendix.

eventually be able to compete for ORR's priority contracts and ultimately meet the long-term integration needs of refugee populations.¹²⁰

An assessment of the initiative conducted in 1986 concluded that the program was relatively successful in creating more sustainable MAAs. Specifically, the assessment identifies significant improvements in organizational capacity, among relatively young organizations as well as among more experienced organizations. Moreover, the assessment indicates that many MAAs receiving grants through this program were providing core resettlement services to substantial caseloads, meeting reporting requirements and generally "serving refugees at least as well as traditional providers, if not more effectively."¹²¹ These findings suggest that many ECBOs in this context were just as capable of providing ORR services to refugee communities as other service providers.

The assessment also unearthed some problems. Several MAAs experienced serious obstacles to their organizational development. The report attributes these challenges to a number of factors, but highlights the MAAs' failure to diversify funding sources as a critical impediment to their effectiveness, and ultimately to the success of the program since identifying alternative sources of funding was a critical objective. Indeed, only six out of the thirty-five MAAs included in the study had utilized other funding sources.¹²² As a result, despite the vital role MAAs had demonstrated as culturally appropriate service providers and vehicles for refugee leadership development, the assessment recognizes that continued support of MAAs as primary providers may not be viable if they are not independently financially sustainable.¹²³ Rather than suggest that the program be terminated, however, the assessment recommends that MAAs be provided with opportunities to expand their funding bases, to the extent that

¹²⁰ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 5.

¹²¹ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 6-7.

¹²² Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 8.

¹²³ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 10.

additional funding and capacity building support could be provided.¹²⁴ The logic behind this recommendation is that those that had diversified their funding were effective service providers.

In 1985, a separate evaluation was conducted of the Targeted Assistance Program (TAP), a formula-based program that promotes refugee employment. Part of that evaluation focused specifically on the performance of MAA service providers as compared to their mainstream (e.g. Volag) counterparts. Findings indicated that the MAAs generally performed worse than non-MAAs. The low MAA outcomes were further analyzed, and it was found that they could be attributed to the MAAs' lack of experience with the service area, lack of human and physical resources and inability to meet ORR administrative requirements.¹²⁵ Despite these shortcomings, the report finds that they could be addressed with technical assistance and concludes that funding of MAAs through this program should continue.¹²⁶

Based on these reports, it seems that in the 1980s ECBOs were important actors in the resettlement system as core resettlement service providers for discretionary and mainstream programs. Although many ECBOs studied struggled to locate the resources required in order to achieve the capacity to provide services adequately, both reports recognized their contributions and advocated their continued funding.

The role carried out by ECBOs in these two programs is in many ways quite different from that of today. Several of the problems they experience have nevertheless remained the same. It is important to note that ECBOs remain primary service providers in some cases, but that this role has been diminished. A 2008 evaluation indicates that in some areas community-based organizations, and ECBOs in particular, remain vital service providers for TAP and other core resettlement programs providing basic social and employment services. The evaluation

¹²⁴ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 11.

¹²⁵ Research Management Corporation, *Evaluation of the Refugee Targeted Assistance Grants Program: Phase I, Final Report* (Hampton, NH: Research Management Corporation, 1985), 128.

¹²⁶ Research Management Corporation, 129.

focused on programs offered in Sacramento, Houston and Miami and found that, whereas in Houston and Miami service providers tended to be Volags and other non-community-based providers, ECBOs were significant actors in Sacramento.¹²⁷ This alternative structure was the product of the local welfare system, in which the local workforce agency relied heavily on ECBOs.¹²⁸ The Sacramento system is somewhat of an anomaly today, since Volags tend to be the major service providers in most U.S. cities with refugee populations.

Changes in the ECBO role are most apparent in the evolution of discretionary programs providing funding specifically to ECBOs. Eventually the MAA Incentive Grants were discontinued. (It is difficult to find information explaining the reasoning behind and exact timing of this decision other than the fact that they were provided at least through the 1980s.) A somewhat comparable program today is the Ethnic Community-Self Help Program, the purpose of which is also to fund ECBOs to serve their communities directly. These programs are otherwise quite different and their divergences are reflective of the evolution of the role of ECBOs in the resettlement system.

One of the most obvious differences between today's Ethnic Community Self-Help Program and the MAA Incentive Grants is that today ECBOs generally receive funding directly from ORR and report directly to ORR. This eliminates the confusion that surrounded the somewhat complicated structure of the Incentive Grants program, in which states had considerable flexibility to make basic decisions about the role of the funded organizations.¹²⁹ ECBOs in one state were likely to be subject to different requirements and have different opportunities than ECBOs in another state. Some states were more committed to utilizing

¹²⁷ The Lewin Group, *The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs* (Falls Church, VA: The Lewin Group, 2008), 18. (Hereinafter "The Lewin Group, *The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs*")

¹²⁸ The Lewin Group, *The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs*, 49.

¹²⁹ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 2.11.

ECBOs than others, and this resulted in discrepancies in the effectiveness of the program in different states.¹³⁰

In contrast, ECBOs receiving grants through the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program are all subject to the same requirements. Of course, it is certainly possible that this more uniform structure has no bearing on the effectiveness of ECBOs operating today. Variation will always exist between ECBOs as a result of their own capacities and the different contexts in which they operate. Furthermore, their flexibility in designing programs only goes so far, as discussed later in this chapter. They are all nonetheless, at least in theory, provided with similar opportunities to facilitate the integration of the communities they serve, regardless of the state in which they operate.

Perhaps more significantly for the purposes of this study, a careful look at the most recent Ethnic Community Self-Help Program grant announcement reveals subtle yet significant changes in thinking regarding the role of community-based organizations in the resettlement system in the period since the MAA Incentive Grants:

ORR recognizes that one key factor in strengthening communities is the development of strong community-based organizations (CBOs). A strong ethnic organization can tap the community's interest in self-help, improving services, supporting community leaders, attracting resources by exploring various opportunities and collaborating with mainstream agencies and groups, and at the same time, remain accountable to the refugee community. . .

Strong CBOs can also facilitate positive interaction between refugees and established residents in mainstream communities. The ability to organize and to voice their concerns collectively gives refugees a better sense of identity and hope for their own and their community's future. Refugee self-help groups can be important building blocks for effective resettlement and *can function as bridges between the refugee community and local resources* by paving the way for smooth integration and positive and productive community relations. ORR has found that effective refugee self-help groups result in refugees' self-sufficiency, independence and active participation in their communities.¹³¹ [emphasis added]

¹³⁰ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 3.2.

¹³¹ Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Standing Announcement for the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program*. (Accessed April 27, 2010); available from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/grants/open/HHS-2008-ACF-ORR-RE-0117.html> (Hereinafter "Standing Announcement")

Although the role of ECBOs in facilitating self-sufficiency formed the basis of both the current Ethnic Community Self-Help and the MAA Incentive Grant programs, the current program diverges from the thinking of the 1980s because it emphasizes the connective role ECBOs play in the resettlement system. Specifically, this program envisions ECBOs as facilitating the creation of bridging social capital (through improved community relations and participation in wider communities) and linking social capital (through improved access to resources and mainstream agencies). This role, which is quite different from the primary service provider role outlined in the MAA Incentive Grants initiative, may be better aligned with the integrative function outlined in the literature regarding ECBOs.

This shift in ORR's strategy was likely gradual. The evolution of thinking was evident in 1995, when ORR issued a grant announcement for discretionary funding of ECBO programs focusing on building multi-state or national networks with activities related to community-building and information and resource sharing among ECBOs.¹³² The announcement clarifies that funding for this program was not to be used for local organizational costs or local activities, but rather for activities that supplement services that were already being provided.

The 1995 announcement is telling because it provides a glimpse into how ORR began to conceive of a different kind of function for ECBOs. In a 2004 *Resource Development Handbook* for ECBOs, the former Director of ORR reflected on the changing position of ECBOs within the resettlement system. He referred to ECBOs as one of the three "pillars of resettlement," next to the State Refugee Programs and the Volags.¹³³ He contrasted the current system, in which ECBOs perform a unique function, with that of the 1980s, when they provided core resettlement services. Instead of acting as primary service providers along with the Volags, the current system views ECBOs as a separate pillar, serving their own function.

¹³² *Federal Register*, 60, no. 10 (January 17, 1995): 3416; 3420.

¹³³ Indochina Resource Action Center, *Resource Development Handbook*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Indochina Resource Action Center, 2004), v.

The Ethnic Community Self-Help Program aligns with this vision. The grant announcement further specifies that ORR has a particular interest in supporting ECBOs serving populations that have been slow to integrate and have not yet attained citizenship.¹³⁴ ORR recognizes that there are refugee communities that are no longer receiving mainstream resettlement services, or are receiving few services, and that are struggling to integrate. The value of ECBOs lies not only in their function as bridges between their communities and wider society and links to mainstream services, but also in their ability to reach populations that have had trouble integrating. The assumption underlying this point is that ECBOs have access to groups that are no longer being reached by the Volags, which tend to focus on newly arrived populations.¹³⁵ This supports the notion of ECBOs as a separate pillar, reaching populations in a different way.

Many ECBOs do serve this bridging/linking function or are able to reach populations in other ways that add significant value to the local resettlement context and may even facilitate integration. Although there are few recent studies providing concrete evidence of the integrative role of ECBOs, they are frequently depicted in local newspapers throughout the U.S. as filling vital gaps. Of course, it is difficult to gauge whether this gap-filling amounts to the establishment of bridging or linking social capital in the way described in the integration literature.

One example of such a story is about the Somali Bantu Community Organization of Syracuse, NY. The Somali Bantu Community Organization, which is one of the organizations that receives technical assistance from ISED Solutions through ISED Solutions' Ethnic

¹³⁴ *Standing Announcement.*

¹³⁵ The intention of this statement is not to imply that Volags never work with populations that have been in the U.S. for several years. Indeed, many Volags work with these populations in fulfillment of their contractual obligations to provide certain ongoing services. At the same time, Volags frequently lack the financial and human resources to provide the depth of services these populations often require. It is perhaps with this reality in mind that ORR has conceived of a role for ECBOs in reaching these populations. ORR also likely recognizes that there are certain populations that have been slow to integrate that might be more easily reached by organizations situated within communities. Together, these realities might explain this objective of the current program. Without documentation supporting this explanation, it is, however, only an assumption.

Community Self-Help grant, was featured in an article in a local newspaper. The article describes how the organization built connections between the community and Syracuse City Schools, Syracuse University and local organizations to develop a youth enrichment program held on Saturdays at one of the local schools. Approximately 100 students take part in the program every week.

All stakeholders in the community have supported the program, according to the article, because it has provided the neighborhood's children—many of whom are Somali Bantu refugees—with a service that was not being provided previously.¹³⁶ In order to encourage participation and mobilize resources, leaders started the program from within the community and eventually expanded it to its current operation at the school. The organization has thus been able to reach the community in a way that other organizations and the local school district had not previously been able to do.

While the Somali Bantu Community Association serves refugees that have been in the U.S. for several years, other ECBOs serve groups that arrived more recently. The Iraqi Mutual Aid Society of Chicago was founded to similarly provide services that fill gaps without duplicating services already being provided.¹³⁷ The organization was featured in a *Chicago Tribune* article about the Iraqi community's efforts to help new arrivals, in light of recent spikes in homelessness among refugees. The article explains how Heartland Alliance, a local resettlement agency, has welcomed the efforts of the Iraqi Mutual Aid Society and another startup organization because they have been able to reach the Iraqi community by providing

¹³⁶ S.C. Linhorst "Learning a New Language; Starting a New Life," *The Post-Standard*, February, 9 2009. (Accessed April 23, 2010); available from LexisNexis.

¹³⁷ P. Jacobson, "From a Syrian Prison to a Chicago Apartment: An Iraqi Refugee's Story," *Huffington Post*, August 10, 2009. (Accessed April 27, 2010); available from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-jacobson/from-a-syrian-prison-to-a_b_249152.html

information and meeting basic needs in a way that is more culturally-specific than they were able to do.¹³⁸

These are just two of the ECBOs that have been featured in the news recently. Many other ECBOs throughout the country are providing similar services, whether to populations that have been slow to integrate or to newly arrived groups struggling to adjust to their new lives. In both cases, the ECBOs are filling gaps in service provision due to the limited resources of local communities. These anecdotes indicate that many ECBOs in the U.S. contribute vital services. Whether these contributions lead to bridging or linking social capital is a difficult question to answer.

Several recent studies substantiate claims of the unique position ECBOs hold within their communities and the vital services they provide as a result. According to a study conducted by the International Rescue Committee and the Migration Policy Institute, since ECBOs in the U.S. are intimately connected with the populations they serve, they are able to provide services that are both linguistically and culturally appropriate and built on relationships of trust.¹³⁹ A study by MOSAICA on leadership within immigrant and refugee communities adds that ECBOs are also equipped to foster leadership in their communities in a way that other organizations are not.¹⁴⁰ This is because they are located in the same neighborhoods as the populations they serve, they offer a familiar environment and, perhaps most importantly, they are already conducting outreach within their communities. The initial legwork that would be required for community development efforts is typically not necessary because of this intimate relationship.

¹³⁸ A. Olivo, "Iraqis in U.S. Aid New Arrivals," *Chicago Tribune*, February 21, 2010. (Accessed April 27, 2010); available from http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-02-21/news/ct-met-iraqi-refugees-network-20100221_1_resettlement-groups-refugees-aid

¹³⁹ Newland, Tanaka and Barker, 27.

¹⁴⁰ Gantz McKay et al. (2000), 9.

These studies further elucidate the variety of ways in which ECBOs engage with the resettlement system. The IRC and MPI study refers to them as service providers, representatives of their communities, advocates, community centers, intermediaries and partners of the federal and local government and Volags.¹⁴¹ Beyond these generalities, it is difficult to specify the position ECBOs hold in the current resettlement system because it depends entirely on the capacity of a given organization and its relationships with local stakeholders and the refugee communities they serve. The IRC/MPI report illustrates this point:

Not only do they help refugees integrate in the short term by offering immediate assistance [with] finding employment or filing legal documents with the government, they also offer creative programs that contribute to medium- and long-term integration.¹⁴²

The lack of clarity regarding specific ECBO contributions within the resettlement system may prove to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, the flexibility of the current system theoretically allows ECBOs to adapt to meet local needs; on the other, varied roles preclude understanding of the value these organizations contribute to the system as a whole, and whether they really are able to facilitate integration.

The fact that ECBO functions are so varied means that they do not necessarily act as a separate “pillar” within the resettlement system, as ORR rhetoric and program descriptions have depicted their current position. Although some ECBOs fill this totally distinct role, it is reasonable to conclude that the majority do not. The degree to which ECBOs accomplish this objective is related to the local contexts in which they operate and the enormous organizational and systemic challenges they face. The following sections utilize findings from recent studies to explore these challenges and place them in historical context.

¹⁴¹ Newland, Tanaka and Barker, 27.

¹⁴² Newland, Tanaka and Barker, 27.

Organizational Challenges Facing ECBOs in the U.S.

Starting and developing an effective ECBO requires significant dedication by its leaders, who, at least initially, are often not paid for their time. ECBOs also frequently need training and resources from outside sources. Studies of refugee- and immigrant-serving ECBOs have consistently identified considerable organizational barriers that inhibit these organizations from becoming effective actors within the resettlement system, often in spite of their dedicated leaders and any outside assistance they receive. Two of the most frequently cited obstacles are acquisition and diversification of funds and intra-community divisiveness.

The most frequently cited barrier identified by ECBOs relates to funding. A significant amount of an ECBO's funding must be dedicated to operational costs, leaving little money for the implementation of projects.¹⁴³ Nearly all ECBOs experience difficulty acquiring and maintaining funds within a competitive environment, although MOSAICA (2000) found that new, smaller ECBOs are affected most severely by their lack of resources.¹⁴⁴ Studies suggest that an organization will increase its ability to implement creative projects if it attracts flexible funding streams in addition to ORR grants.¹⁴⁵ ECBOs with a variety of funders are also more likely to be able to devote funds to developing the organization itself.¹⁴⁶

A MOSAICA report on technical assistance provided to ECBOs found that the greatest technical assistance need identified by ECBOs was related to accessing funds.¹⁴⁷ At the same time, technical assistance was often not coupled with financial resources. ECBO leaders identified this as a problem, because without financial assistance they would not be able to take

¹⁴³ Newland, Tanaka and Barker, 49.

¹⁴⁴ Gantz McKay et al. (2000), 8.

¹⁴⁵ Newland, Tanaka and Barker, 49; Gantz McKay et al (2000), 7.

¹⁴⁶ Gantz McKay et al. (2000), 7.

¹⁴⁷ Gantz McKay et al. (2001), 15.

advantage of the technical assistance they had been given.¹⁴⁸ This raises an interesting problem for technical assistance providers.

An evaluation of the Capacity Building Initiative (CBI) provides some context for this problem. The goal of CBI was to build the organizational effectiveness of local refugee- and immigrant-serving ECBOs in Ohio by providing them with small grants and intensive training and technical assistance.¹⁴⁹ The evaluation findings indicate that many of the grantees were actually motivated to participate in the program simply because of the limited funding it offered. This surprised CBI organizers, who had intended the money as an additional incentive for participating in the program and not as anything that could be used to sustain the organizations.

The result of this misunderstanding was that several organizations were worried about their financial sustainability once the funding ceased, and were unable to implement the lessons they learned from the technical assistance they had received. The evaluation cautions that this could lead to ECBO dependency on CBI funding if technical assistance does not relate to helping the organizations find alternative sources of funding.¹⁵⁰ Although this project was unrelated to ORR funding streams, the findings are likely relevant to all ECBOs seeking funding in competitive environments. Where funding is limited, it is important for funders and technical assistance providers to think about how organizations can become sustainable.

ORR has recognized the importance of this finding and encourages ECBOs to seek alternative funding so that their initiatives will be sustainable once the federal grant is exhausted. Diversification of funding sources has been a critical component of ORR's collaborative efforts with ECBOs since the beginning of the resettlement program; as previously mentioned, one objective for states receiving funds through the MAA Incentive Grant initiative was to help MAAs obtain alternative funding sources. Despite their best intentions, however,

¹⁴⁸ Gantz McKay et al. (2001), 21.

¹⁴⁹ The Columbus Foundation, *Capacity Building Initiative for Immigrant and Refugee Organizations: Two-year Pilot Summative Evaluation* (Columbus, OH: The Columbus Foundation, 2008), 3.

¹⁵⁰ The Columbus Foundation, 34.

securing outside sources of funding remains the most significant obstacle for many ECBOs. A report by the Urban Institute on immigrant-serving ECBOs attributes the particularly difficult time ECBOs have had locating funding in recent years to the economic downturn, which has caused the number of resources to diminish while demand for ECBO services has increased.¹⁵¹ Diversification of funding sources seems especially problematic in the current economic climate.

The second frequently cited organizational challenge ECBOs face relates to intra-community divisiveness. As findings in other resettlement countries have indicated, such divisiveness, whether related to ethnic tensions or home country politics, negatively affects the functioning of some ECBOs in the U.S.¹⁵² Where this occurs, it undermines the critical advantage ECBOs have vis-à-vis Volags as actors in the development of their own communities. The IRC/MPI report provides the example of Somali discrimination against minority tribes in Minneapolis which affected the relationships of the local ECBO.¹⁵³ A recent conflict between ethnic Somalis and the Somali Bantu community in Manchester, New Hampshire further illustrates the effect tensions can have on the functioning of an ECBO. In that case, the Somali Bantu Community Association of Manchester had to temporarily halt its programming while authorities looked into false allegations made by the ethnic Somalis.¹⁵⁴ In the end, this issue fortunately did not have a significant impact on the Somali Bantu Community Association.¹⁵⁵

Yet another example of intra-community divisiveness occurred in Madison, Wisconsin, where United Asian Services—formed as a combination of smaller ethnic groups in order to prevent competition—has been torn apart by divisions along clan lines that erupted after

¹⁵¹ De Leon et al., 35.

¹⁵² Newland, Tanaka and Barker, 48; Gantz McKay et al. (2000), 8; N. Glick Schiller et al., *Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire: Pathways and Barriers to Building Community* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, 2009), 25.

¹⁵³ Newland, Tanaka and Barker, 48.

¹⁵⁴ B.L. Hall, "Somali Kids' Program Put on Hold," *New Hampshire Union Leader*, January 29, 2010. (Accessed April 27, 2010); available from <http://www.unionleader.com/article.aspx?headline=Somali+kids%27+program+put+on+hold&articleId=bc02f20d-2421-4dab-baa5-11296ed2179d>

¹⁵⁵ This information is based on the author's work with the organization through ISED Solutions. The Somali Bantu Community Association was able to resume its program shortly after the article was written.

disagreements over the handling of services to newly arrived populations of Hmong refugees.¹⁵⁶ Unlike the dispute in Manchester, however, the situation seems to have affected local resettlement operations quite negatively. It is important to note that these cases likely receive a disproportionate amount of attention in the media, resulting in a skewed vision among the general public of the frequency of ethnic divisions within refugee communities. At the same time, divisions do occur within communities and this sometimes affects the capacity of ECBOs.

At times, the potential for discord within or between ethnic communities may be reason enough to decide not to start an ECBO. ISED Solutions relates how Somali Bantu communities in Lewiston, ME and Burlington, VT chose to utilize their technical assistance and mini-grant funding provided through an Ethnic Community Self-Help grant toward specific community development projects, rather than toward the development of an ECBO. Community members attributed this decision to tensions which had arisen within their own communities and with other refugee and immigrant populations in their wider communities.¹⁵⁷ These community members viewed community development projects as a more viable alternative to starting an ECBO, which they knew would require significant time and resources and may have incited further conflict.

These findings indicate that despite the potential benefits an ECBO can bring to its community, starting an ECBO may not always be the best way to meet community needs, particularly if there are divisions within the community. Furthermore, creating a financially sustainable ECBO presents a huge challenge. These organizational obstacles, and several others not emphasized in the studies used in this report, likely inhibit ECBOs from making vital contributions to their communities.

¹⁵⁶ P. Schneider, "Fight Over Relief Agency Shows Hmong Clan Friction," *The Capital Times*, March 24, 2010. (Accessed April 27, 2010); available from http://host.madison.com/ct/news/local/article_ef1b039c-36b1-11df-b452-001cc4c03286.html

¹⁵⁷ ISED Solutions, *Practitioner Lessons from the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program, Somali Bantu Community Development Project* (Washington, D.C.: ISED Solutions, 2009), 5.

Systemic Factors Inhibiting ECBO Sustainability and Effectiveness in the U.S.

ECBOs are not only limited by their own organizational challenges. They also face constraints within a system that is often inflexible. This is particularly true for ECBOs that receive funding from ORR and engage with other service providers in the resettlement system. The relationship between these ECBOs and the federal government is not easy to characterize. In her work comparing faith-based and secular nonprofit organizations in the U.S., Nawyn contends that Volags have a closer relationship with the state than ECBOs, which she says are tied more to the refugees they serve. She argues that ECBOs are more distant from the federal government's agenda and are therefore able to implement broader approaches.¹⁵⁸ The reality, however, is that because these refugee-serving ECBOs usually receive a large part, if not all, of their funding from the federal government, they are subject to federal requirements. This likely differs once they diversify their funding streams, but as discussed previously, most organizations struggle to accomplish this.

Findings indicate that the nature of federal funding has limited ECBOs to a certain degree. Smaller ECBOs are particularly constrained by specific requirements and, due to their limited funding sources, are often focused on surviving as an organization rather than developing the organization in a way that might facilitate sustainability. This was likely just as common in the 1980s as it is today. The assessment of the MAA Incentive Grants explains how the limited funding ECBOs have and their resulting dependence on their funders may preclude them from carrying out effective programming:

The services that MAAs deliver has usually been defined by the funding source rather than the MAAs' sense of community needs. Moreover, in starting service contracts, many MAAs are no longer able to initiate or continue other services that are defined as their own organizational priorities.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ S. Nawyn, "Faith, Ethnicity and Culture in Refugee Resettlement," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49, no. 11 (2006): 1526.

¹⁵⁹ Lewin and Associates, *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*, 3.2.

Current ORR grants provided to ECBOs generally allow them to adapt program requirements to the projects they implement in a much more flexible manner than in the 1980s. At the same time, the problem outlined in the assessment of the Incentive Grants remains relevant today because ECBOs are for the most part still constrained by limited funding.

More concretely, limited ECBO funds are generally put toward accomplishing what ORR has asked them to do. Few resources are left for activities that are outside of ORR requirements but which may nonetheless be vital to the effectiveness of the organization. According to the IRC/MPI report, activities that likely receive little attention due to limited funding include needs assessments, strategic planning and the development and implementation of innovative programs or forums where the ECBO can empower community members in ways that are outside of their daily activities.¹⁶⁰ One of the most troubling results of this system is that without time and resources to reflect on—and hopefully evaluate—their programs, it is difficult for ECBOs to know whether they are meeting the integration needs of their communities. It can be inferred from this that despite the shift toward greater flexibility in program requirements, ECBOs remain similarly constrained as they were in the 1980s.

The problem facing ECBOs is that, although these constraints may limit their organizational potential, without federal funding they often would not be able to exist at all. Hein places this trend in historical context, explaining that with the expansion of the welfare state in the U.S. the federal government has increasingly relied on nonprofit organizations, while simultaneously eroding some of their power to make organizational decisions.¹⁶¹ The ramifications of this design are difficult to discern. Certainly the impact would be negative if this system was perpetuating the existence of ineffective organizations. In Hein's study, which was based on data from 1984, the second best predictor of the proliferation of Indochinese

¹⁶⁰ Newland, Tanaka and Barker, 7.

¹⁶¹ J. Hein, "Ethnic Organizations and the Welfare State: The Impact of Social Welfare Programs on the Formation of Indochinese Refugee Associations," *Sociological Forum*, 12, no. 2 (1997): 291.

MAAs in a given state was the level of ORR spending on refugee social services in that state.¹⁶² This finding is concerning because it raises questions about whether ECBOs exist for the right reasons. Where organizations exist simply because there is funding to support them, the system is problematic. This was probably not the reason many ECBOs were established in the 1980s and there is no evidence that this is the reason many ECBOs exist today. Most ECBOs are more often than not founded to meet real needs within their communities.

The more likely effect of ECBO reliance on the federal government for funding is that these organizations become stuck in a cycle of limited impact on their communities. With limited funding and pressure to demonstrate the results of that funding, there are few resources to dedicate to growing sustainable and effective organizations. Evidence indicates that, although many ECBOs in the U.S. may be contributing to their communities by filling important service gaps, their impact might be much more significant if they had sufficient resources. Furthermore, this impact might relate to the integration of the communities they serve if they were able to foster bridging and linking social capital.

¹⁶² Hein, 291.

V. Discussion

Two research questions guide this study: 1) *What is the role of ethnic community-based organizations in refugee integration in the U.S.?*; and 2) *What factors influence the ability of ECBOs to contribute to refugee integration?* In this section, findings regarding ECBOs in the U.S. are discussed relative to what has been said elsewhere about the role of ECBOs in order to address these questions.

In response to the first question, the findings indicate that ECBOs lack a clear role in the U.S. resettlement system. There is evidence that ECBOs are contributing vital services to their communities, often filling gaps in service provision, but more research needs to be done to determine whether this gap-filling creates the sort of bridging and linking social capital that is, according to the literature, necessary for integration. It seems from this preliminary research that ECBOs are often thwarted in their genuine efforts to facilitate integration in their communities.

The answer to the second question raises much more complex problems for policymakers and service providers in the resettlement system. The findings suggest that a number of factors likely limit the impact of ECBOs on their communities. These include both organizational and systemic challenges, although structural barriers are likely the most significant factor preventing ECBOs from carrying out an integrative role. The remainder of this section utilizes the theoretical and empirical findings presented in this study to explore these questions in greater depth, ultimately laying the groundwork for further research on this issue.

Official thinking regarding the potential contributions of ECBOs in the U.S. has gradually evolved in recent decades to envision ECBOs as a separate pillar within the resettlement

system, offering services that are distinct from Volags and other mainstream service providers. This role is depicted as one in which ECBOs fill vital gaps, reaching particular communities that have been slow to integrate and serving as bridges and links between their communities, society at large and mainstream services. This vision is supported by the literature on integration in resettlement countries throughout the world, which theorizes a role for ECBOs in building bridging and linking social capital in order to ultimately facilitate integration.

Yet this official rhetoric contradicts reality. ECBOs in the U.S. lack adequate funding and their actual contributions to the system are not well-defined. Some ECBOs fill service gaps while others perform completely different functions. Those that are filling service gaps are likely not able to establish the sort of bridging and linking social capital that would be necessary to facilitate the integration of their communities, although there is limited evidence supporting this assumption. More research should be done specifically on the integrative impact of ECBOs on their communities, as most studies have instead focused on their functional role.

What is abundantly clear is that most ECBOs face significant organizational challenges, as they lack the funding and capacity necessary to develop as organizations. These challenges are for the most part related to the systems in which these organizations operate. The Ethnic Community Self-Help Program supports ECBOs in their efforts to facilitate integration in their communities, but this program is under-funded and is not a priority within a resettlement system that emphasizes programming that leads to early employment and the achievement of economic self-sufficiency, rather than discretionary programming like the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program.

Consequently, ECBOs receiving funding through this system are often constrained by requirements and are unable to diversify funding sources so that they can become more sustainable, effective organizations. They are particularly ill-equipped to conduct needs assessments and follow-up to determine the most effective way to assist their communities.

Although the majority of ECBOs are created to facilitate the integration of their communities, most of them become stuck in a cycle of mediocre service provision within a constraining system and, as a result, are unable to actually achieve this impact.

These findings regarding ECBOs in the U.S. are consistent with the literature on other resettlement countries. Findings elsewhere indicate that increased emphasis on the role of ECBOs as sources of social capital and empowerment in their communities has not been accompanied by funding that would enable ECBOs to actually carry out this role and ultimately contribute to the integration of their communities. The state, which maintains decision-making power by controlling funding streams, does not adequately support ECBOs and other nonprofit organizations to accomplish the task they have delegated to them.

It is reasonable to assume that an increase in funding for discretionary programs such as the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program would help ECBOs to build their capacity and ultimately become sustainable organizations with diverse funding sources. It remains unclear whether such funding increases alone would enable ECBOs to carry out the integrative role imagined for them in the literature. This will likely remain elusive for ECBOs as long as structural barriers exist within the resettlement system.

As Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter argue, although there are many ECBOs that are adding significant value to their communities, their capacity to engage with mainstream society and decision makers in a meaningful way is severely limited by the fact that refugee communities remain marginalized. Within such a system, ECBOs may just represent “institutionalised marginality.”¹⁶³ According to this argument, in order to actually build social capital—and particularly linking social capital, which would engender genuinely equal access to services—and ultimately facilitate integration, ECBOs would have to be able to engage with mainstream actors from a position that is not at the margin of society.

¹⁶³ Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter, 216.

This argument raises some bigger questions about the U.S. resettlement system's overarching objectives. If, as concluded in this study, integration requires that receiving and newcomer communities work together, then it would be counterproductive to fund organizations such as ECBOs to facilitate integration from the margins of society. Instead, in order to promote bridging and linking social capital within their communities, ECBOs must be able to act as true intermediaries, positioned both within the resettlement system and within their communities. In their current state, they remain for the most part strictly within their communities.

Bringing ECBOs in from the margins would require much more than increasing the funding provided to them. Instead, it would necessitate a shift in how the resettlement system conceives of integration. This is because the current system prioritizes the achievement of objective outcomes, especially employment, over other indicators of integration. Other factors, such as the building of social connections, are not emphasized. If ECBOs are going to be vital actors within the system, and potentially serve as the third pillar of the system, then a new approach to integration is in order.

In the U.S., there has in recent years been a positive discursive shift toward recognizing that there are other factors (and indicators) of integration besides employment. An Integration Working Group has developed a definition of integration that reflects global best practices and its recommendations for how the Office of Refugee Resettlement might institute a more holistic approach to integration are expected shortly. The Working Group imagines a greater role for ORR's discretionary programs, such as the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program. According to the Working Group, these programs are underfunded and underemphasized within the current system.

If ECBOs are prioritized within a more holistic approach to integration, they could have a significant impact on the integration of their communities. They are well-positioned to access

hard-to-serve populations within their communities. This is particularly important today, as there is a growing population of refugees in the U.S. exhibiting low literacy levels and limited English language abilities. These populations are experiencing significant challenges integrating and ECBOs are uniquely capable of reaching these communities, provided that they have the capacity to do so.

Such an approach would require significant changes to the current resettlement system. At the time of writing, it is unclear whether actors within the system are willing to make such changes. It is similarly unknown whether expanding the role of ECBOs would even be beneficial. In theory, greater support of ECBOs and the removal of structural barriers inhibiting them would enhance their ability to facilitate integration. As discussed in the literature, however, the theoretical integrative ability of ECBOs has not been proven empirically. Whether prioritizing ECBOs is the best option for the U.S. resettlement system therefore remains unknown. More research needs to be done in order to substantiate or disprove claims of the integrative role of ECBOs, as this study merely scratches the surface of this issue.

Conclusion

This study has explored the role of ethnic community-based organizations in refugee integration in the U.S. ECBOs are for the most part unable to influence the integration of their communities due to the organizational and systemic challenges they face, particularly structural barriers which prevent them from engaging with mainstream society in ways that would enable them to build social capital within their communities and ultimately facilitate integration.

This study concludes that in order to remove these structural barriers, the U.S. resettlement system, which is currently at a crossroads, would likely have to be reoriented toward a more holistic vision of integration. It is unclear whether decision makers within the resettlement system are willing to make the changes necessary to accomplish this project. Furthermore, more research needs to be done to determine whether ECBOs would be the most effective integrative vehicles within a more holistic approach to integration. At the very least, this study reveals the dearth of information that exists on this topic, and demonstrates the need for more empirically-based studies in the U.S. on the impact of ECBOs on their communities.

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