

The Self-Perceived Needs of Homeless African Refugees in Tel Aviv's Levinsky Park

Suhail Stephen and Michael Schmautz

On behalf of the African Refugee Development Center
Tel Aviv, Israel

July 2011

Executive Summary

Of the over 33,000 African refugees currently in Israel, a considerable albeit undocumented number have had or currently face various experiences of homelessness. South Tel Aviv's Levinsky Park is one locale in which this reality is most visible. The objective of this qualitative study, conducted on behalf of the African Refugee Development Center (ARDC) in Tel Aviv, was to understand the perceptions of Levinsky Park's homeless African refugees relative to their most important needs, in order to provide a frame of reference by which refugee service providers may more effectively determine and evaluate current and prospective service offerings, and ultimately improve the lives of homeless African refugees in Israel. The study's findings distill and prioritize the perceived needs of these refugees into five interrelated themes involving work, housing, education, health, and food/drink. While the findings reveal the immensity and urgency of homeless African refugees' needs, as well as imply that the Israeli government and various refugee-serving organizations have not satisfactorily addressed the same, the findings also suggest specific steps which may be taken in order to more effectively meet these needs.

Introduction

This study was executed by Suhail Stephen and Michael Schmautz in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A in Community Leadership and Philanthropy Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The study seeks to examine a particular aspect of the various realities facing the over 33,000 African refugees currently in Israel. Specifically, it was conducted on behalf of the African Refugee Development Center (ARDC)¹ as a means of establishing the perceptions of homeless African refugees in the locale of Levinsky Park in South Tel Aviv relative to their most important needs.

Levinsky Park is one of the places in Israel in which the reality of homeless African refugees is most visible, with a considerable albeit undocumented number of refugees finding daily "oasis" by means of sleeping in the park's grass areas and amongst its playground equipment. While there is some research² which alludes to these conditions and situations, there has not been a concentrated effort to document the perceptions of Levinsky's refugees with respect to their needs. This particular paucity of research means that there is significant

¹ The ARDC is a nonprofit organization located in South Tel Aviv that was "founded in 2004 by refugees and Israeli citizens to assist, support and empower refugees and asylum seekers in Israel. [The organization] divides its work between individual counselling, humanitarian aid, education, community development, awareness raising and policy initiatives" (African Refugee Development Center, 2011).

² The nature of this research will be clarified in the literature review.

guesswork about whether or not current services³ to this community are actually meeting needs, as well as about which services should be offered and why. Ultimately, without this information, the considerably taxing circumstances and experiences of untold numbers of homeless African refugees in Levinsky Park are subject to inertia.

Bearing these considerations in mind, the aim of this study is to supplement the scarce research and largely anecdotal information on the homeless African refugee community in the locale of Levinsky Park with relevant qualitative data about their perceptions of needs. We hope that this information will establish a means by which the ARDC and other refugee service providers can better create, implement, hone, and evaluate services to this community, thereby more effectively ameliorating the situations of refugees and enhancing their opportunity for independence and social integration in Israel.

Literature Review

As of August 2009, there were a reported 17,500 refugees and asylum seekers in Israel. The majority of these people came from either Eritrea and Sudan, with the former estimated to be around 7,500 and the latter estimated to be around 6,000 (Refugees' Rights Forum, 2009). "By the end of 2010, there were 33,273 asylum seekers or African migrants in Israel" (Furst-Nichols & Jacobsen, 2011, p. 2), with between an estimated 85 to 95% coming from Eritrea and Sudan. The considerable increase in numbers is due to the fact that, according to Israeli officials, around 2,000 African migrants currently enter Israel via the Egyptian border each month.

Although the reasons that Eritreans and Sudanese comprise the majority of Israel's refugee and asylum seeker population are multidimensional, the especially difficult and tumultuous background of the countries from which these people come is an undeniable factor in their decision to come to Israel. Eritrea has been described as a country in which "human rights violations and political persecution [...] are widespread, and include the holding of prisoners of conscience without charging or trial, persecution on religious grounds, the disappearance of

³ Services other than those of the ARDC will be clarified in the literature review.

citizens, and so forth” (Refugees’ Rights Forum, 2009, p. 1). Sudan, and Darfur in particular, on the other hand, has been described by the United Nations as having experienced the “worst humanitarian crisis in the world in recent years” (Refugees’ Rights Forum, 2009, p. 1). Given the severity of these facts, it is unsurprising that Eritreans and Sudanese comprise the majority of Israel’s refugee population.

Virtually all Eritreans and Sudanese come directly from their home countries and pass through Cairo for a few days en route to Israel. In Egypt, they are put in touch with Bedouin smugglers, who “they [...] pay between \$350 and \$7,000 dollars [depending on race, religion, and other factors] for guidance across the Egyptian Sinai to the Israeli border” (Furst-Nichols & Jacobsen, 2011, p. 1). There is increasing documentation that refugees face extreme abuse and extortion at the hands of Bedouin smugglers. The facts are both horrific and unimaginable, including reports of “electric shocks on all parts of the body, burning with white-hot iron bars, confinement, loss of consciousness, and death in sweltering containers [...] The situation in the [Bedouin] camps is beyond belief: many African migrants report systematic and severe torturing on their way here, with about half the women raped” (Fishbein, 2010, p. 1). In addition, Egyptian border police have a reputation of shooting and killing refugees who are caught attempting clandestine border crossings into Israel (Afeef, 2009). Consequently, most refugees who actually make it into Israel are relatively healthy, young males who are more physically disposed to successfully negotiate the arduous journey from their home countries and overcome the realities they face at the hands of Bedouin smugglers and Egyptian border police (Refugees’ Rights Forum, 2009).

Once African refugees cross the border into Israel, they are often picked up by Israeli Defense Force (IDF) personnel and are routinely transferred to various detention facilities. The largest of these is Saharonym, an extension of Ketsiot prison in the Negev, which houses 2000 African refugees, including around 200 women and children. While there “appears to be no coordinated policy regarding how long individuals are held at the detention center” (Furst-Nichols & Jacobsen, 2011, p. 10), refugees are frequently given free one-way bus tickets to Tel Aviv upon release. There are no governmental supports or services for refugees when they disembark at the Central Bus Station in South Tel Aviv.

Typically, African refugees receive a 2A5 conditional release visa that must be renewed every three months. This visa “is officially a deportation order, with the ‘condition’ of [...] release that [refugees] must cooperate with the order should the government decide to follow through; [it] is only protection from deportation and does not provide any rights” (Furst-Nichols & Jacobsen, 2011, p. 14). The visa stipulations, as well as the absence of governmental supports and services after the provision of complimentary bus tickets, are clear examples of the fact that although Israel “was an early supporter of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees [and] became a signatory to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol in 1954 and 1968, respectively [...] little was done to translate [these] obligations into the domestic legal framework” (Afeef, 2009, p. 8). Practically speaking, while refugees find a modicum of safety in Israel and even “Despite official recognition of their status as refugees, they are not entitled to any assistance in order to enable them to integrate in society; unlike other countries, Israel has no procedure for naturalization” (Refugees’ Rights Forum, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, as of December 2010 the 2A5 conditional release visa explicitly states that the holder is not entitled to work. This inability to work, coupled with the absence of effective mechanisms of integration and naturalization, means that after arriving at the Central Bus Station in South Tel Aviv, many African refugees face economic and social hardship and inevitably become homeless in nearby Levinsky Park.

Apart from the ARDC, there are a number of organizations⁴ which, in one way or another, provide services of which homeless African refugees in Levinsky Park may avail themselves. While these organizations have significant first-hand and anecdotal information about the conditions and experiences of refugees in the park, there is a dearth of systematic and documented research on this particular community. A notable, recent exception is Furst-Nichols & Jacobsen’s (2011) research which described Levinsky Park as a place where many African

⁴ These include but are not limited to the Aid Organization for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (ASSAF), the Hotline for Migrant Workers, Kav LaOved, Mesila, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), which respectively provide “advocacy and individual and family psychosocial support; [...] visits to asylum seekers in detention and legal representation; [...] advocacy for employment and labour rights for asylum seekers; [...] assistance, counselling, advocacy and community empowerment; [and] provision of primary and secondary healthcare” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010). These organizations are “implementing partners” with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which also engages in its own advocacy and capacity building activities.

refugees wait to be picked up for work in vain, as a kind of hub where people reconnect with social networks on the weekends, and as an area replete with homeless African refugees who sleep outdoors and amongst playground equipment every day after 10:30pm.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology which involved three semi-structured focus group discussions and participant observation. With the use of convenience sampling, a total of 27 African refugees were identified for focus group discussions between April and May 2011. Participants ranged between 23 to 32 years of age, with 24 from Sudan and three from Eritrea. As is characteristic of qualitative studies in general, the sample size was not predetermined but, rather, was expanded until data saturation emerged.

People who were sitting in Levinsky Park were approached and asked if they would be willing to speak about their needs as African refugees; those who consented were subsequently recruited as participants in the focus group discussions. While this method did not guarantee that each participant was homeless at the time, the focus group discussions indicated that most were in fact currently homeless, or had been at one point during their time in Israel. Discussions were each about 55 minutes in duration and were conducted, sitting, in a circle, in the grass areas of Levinsky Park. Food and beverages were provided to facilitate the psychological comfort of participants and their willingness to engage in discussion. A local translator was utilized for the interviews given that neither of the researchers spoke Arabic or Tigrinya, the native languages of most refugees in Levinsky Park. Although a discussion guide was created to maintain consistency between focus groups, the process was open to allow for exploration of individual experiences and perceptions. Discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers, and each participant permitted the use of audio recording.

Given that most African refugees in Israel and especially in Levinsky Park are men, as well as considering the sampling strategy aforementioned, the sample includes no female participants. This limitation, coupled with the fact that the timing of interviews was determined by the schedules and geographical considerations of the researchers and the translator, may mean

that the sample is not representative of the full spectrum of the experiences and perceptions of homeless African refugees in Levinsky Park.

Results and Findings

The main result of the research findings supplements current information on the homeless African refugee community in Levinsky Park by providing qualitative data which both distills and prioritizes their needs, in accordance to their own perceptions, into five general themes involving work, housing, education, health, and food/drink. Though these themes are certainly substantively independent, they are by no means mutually exclusive and are, in fact, often interrelated. The following presentation of the themes reflects the refugees' prioritization of needs from highest to lowest; the basis for priority was established according to the frequency with which each respective theme arose in the focus group discussions.

Work

Participants overwhelmingly cited the need for work or employment as *the* fundamental factor to improving their lives, far above any other factor. One participant evidenced this thinking in saying that if he was to "get a job, then everything is fine." Respondents appeared to conceive of the lack of employment as the reason why the status quo of their lives in Levinsky Park is perpetuated, with one man saying that "When refugees first arrive [they] haven't any money and stay here [in the park] and face many problems." Additionally, participants contextualized the necessity of work and earning income in relation to other issues such as securing independent housing, accessing health care, acquiring education, and obtaining food/drink.

In tandem with the virtually unanimous perception of the importance of work, participants repeatedly described how difficult it was to both secure and maintain a source of employment. In fact, respondents described a general experience of sporadic and ad hoc employment which was disproportionate to both their expectations of work opportunities in Israel and especially to the duration of their time here. One man said "I have six months here but don't think I have worked two days," while two others respectively said "I stayed here for three

[or] four months without job and I was facing a lot of suffering” and “Maybe I have twenty days here [without] one day to go to work.” Summarizing these sentiments, another participant said that “We are here working from time to time, on and off.” Considering the financial and mental implications of this employment unreliability facing him in Israel, one respondent added that “it is better for me to go back to my country [to get a job and that] psychologically this will be better for me.”

Participants described a routine of angling for employment along one of the main thoroughfares adjacent to Levinsky Park, hoping that “somebody comes and takes you to go to work.” One man received a job because someone stopped his car, said that he had ten hours worth of work, and took several refugees with him. Another respondent said that he spends his time “Just waiting for daily works around here. Up to 8:30pm if there's no work, I can go to sleep.” Participants suggested that their employment was largely informal, involving day labor activities such as building and construction.

Except for one instance in which a man alluded to health considerations, participants correlated their difficulty in securing and maintaining a source of employment with their visa status. In all focus group discussions, there was never a suggestion that any of the participants had a visa other than the 2A5 conditional release. Many specified that the visa's “no work” clause “is a big problem” and identified it as the key reason they were not working. One man distinguished the previous and current stipulations of the visa and said that “Before, the refugees numbers were increasing; [on] the visa was written ‘l'avoda [Hebrew for ‘to work’]. But now ‘ein avoda’ [Hebrew for ‘without work’].”

Participants frequently disparaged this current visa stipulation disallowing work, both in terms of heightening their inability to secure employment as well as in terms of encouraging employers' reluctance to hire them. With regard to the former, one respondent said that “We need the [work] visa. Without [this] visa – there is no avoda [Hebrew for ‘work’].” Another participant qualified this statement by stating that obtaining a work visa was a *primary* necessity, saying that “The first thing I need [is] the visa, because [then] I will get the job.” On the other hand, several respondents said that the “no work” clause inhibited employers' willingness to hire

refugees and, on some occasions, served as grounds for dismissal from existing jobs. One man seemed to empathize with these realities by explaining that employers are “afraid” because “if [they] allow [refugees] to work, [...] the government [will] make problems.”

To counteract the implications of their no work 2A5 conditional release visas, participants described going to organizations to receive “the paper” which states, in Hebrew, that employers will not be prosecuted for hiring them. Although respondents acknowledged that they had received the paper from both the ARDC and ASSAF, one man said that “The paper does not allow [you] to work.” Beyond provision of the paper, there was general ambiguity about which organizations could practically help with visa issues and one participant even expressed frustration that he had been “many times to ASSAF or ARDC and they did not help.” Another man expressed an expectation that organizational assistance be generally provided for refugees’ visa issues, saying that “The organizations are the ones who know these things.”

In cases where participants were able to secure employment, the issue of exploitation at the hands of employers who were characterized as “thieves” manifested with disturbing frequency. Throughout the focus group discussions, respondents expressed considerable frustration about working for hours, days, or even months without receiving promised financial remuneration. One man said that he had worked “for ten hours,” only to have the man who employed him abscond from the job premises. Though he had the employer’s number, he did not have the money to purchase a phone card to locate the employer. Two other respondents recounted similar stories of working two and fifteen days, only to have employers deceptively say “I’m going here and I’ll come back” or cut 400 shekels, respectively. Still another participant said that “I worked three months; [for] two months [I] received the salary and one month I did not.” This man suggested that his frustration was magnified by the fact that when he requested help from an organization, they said “no problem we can help you, but nobody at the organization helped.” Given his cumulative experience with employment and organizational neglect, he did not wish to remain in Israel and said that “I want to go back to Sudan.”

Several participants identified ethnicity as a salient factor in exploitation. In contrast to the “Israel community,” “Israeli people with citizenship,” or “Israeli people,” they particularly

referred to “Arab people,” “Bedouins,” and “nomad people” as “corrupting” the worker rights of refugees by denying work or withholding promised salaries. One man said that he had “worked for one month for 4000 shekels” only to have his “Arab manager” refuse to pay at the end of the month. The participant called the manager only to be threatened with possible legal action.

Concurrent to the significant obstacles refugees encounter in obtaining employment, participants resoundingly articulated frustration with both the government and organizations in proffering opportunities and support for employment. One man expected that “Israel [would be] good and [that he would] have a job” but to that when he “arrived here, [he] found life [...] very difficult.”

Housing

Participants identified housing as their second most important need. They frequently referred to the need for a “house,” a “home,” or a “residence,” and specifically contextualized the importance of such things in relation to sleep. Many participants said that there was “no place” for them to sleep and suggested that the difficulty of finding such a place was both caused and exacerbated by the fact that they were “new” to Israel in general and to South Tel Aviv in particular. Additionally, one man correlated the importance of having a place to sleep with the viability of educational learning, saying that “If you want to go to school and you don't have a house, how can you learn? [...] First you need a residence.” Save for one participant who said he “did not care” about housing and sleep, there was significant consensus in perspectives on these issues.

Although the focus group discussions intentionally avoided probing the present sleeping conditions of participants, several men volunteered that they were currently sleeping in Levinsky Park. One man said he became aware of this possibility through randomly meeting another person who subsequently brought him to the park. Another participant said that refugees “stay in the park [because] they have no relatives here.” In describing the reality of sleeping outdoors, especially during the winter months, one man said that “I used to go to bring cardboard to sleep here in the garden even though there was no blanket [and] the weather was very cold.” While several participants seemed to be aware of organizations which provide alternatives to sleeping

in the park, only one man acknowledged that he was actually sleeping “in a house of the organization.” Though he neither specified the name of organization nor the location of the house, he did say that the arrangement is a “real problem” and that “it is not okay” because it is not “safe [or] comfortable [since] there are many people and it’s crowded.”

In tandem with the virtual unanimity about the necessity of housing was a similarly uniform expectation that external parties address this necessity. In some cases, participants did not specify these external parties, saying simply that refugees have “nobody to welcome them” and that houses and places to sleep should be provided for them. In other cases, participants expected the Israeli government, various organizations, or both to play a more significant role. One man said that the government should “prepare us the houses,” while another added that “It should be like European countries, [where] the government has camps for [a] short time.” Another participant said that “If the organizations help the people, they won’t come to stay in the park; no one [would] come to sleep here.” Finally, one man intimated that the burden of responsibility was on *both* the government and Israeli organizations, saying that “What we know in every country [is that] when you enter, [both parties] are welcoming to you [and] build a camp.”

Education

The necessity of education emerged as a repeated theme in the focus group discussions. One man put the matter in succinct albeit existential terms when he said that “Without education, you cannot be.” The necessity of education was also considered to have practical importance. One participant qualified it as integral to his motivation for coming to Israel, saying that “I came here to this country to get asylum and to get protection and to get an education,” whereas another man suggested that it would be shameful and embarrassing to return to his home country “without knowledge, without nothing.” A few participants characterized the issue of education as “the problem” facing them in Israel, adding that they “really, really didn’t get education” and that they did not consider educational possibilities a reality for them here. Cost was cited as a significant barrier to education. Bearing these various difficulties in mind and further emphasizing the importance of education in migration decisions, one man said “there

is no education. If there is no education, I can go to another country to get [it].”

Throughout the focus group discussions, the issue of language study was the only particular clarification of the general need for education. There was unequivocal consensus about the need to learn both Hebrew and English, with the entirety of participants in the first focus group discussion agreeing on this matter. Participants conceived of proficiency in these languages as an invaluable social tool without which there is no “communication.” Although one man said that “if you speak English, [...] your life may be easy [and] not as difficult [as it would be for] a person who speaks Arabic,” the focus group discussions did not reveal a recognizable preference for either Hebrew or English.

In contrast to native languages, *both* Hebrew and English were perceived to have practical advantages for life in Israel, especially in relation to preventing exploitation in work or employment. One participant even said that certain employers exploit *because* they are aware of the lack of refugees' language proficiency since the latter can't identify police stations (whose nomenclature is in Hebrew) or “differentiate between the police and the civilian uniform.” In addition to often being the reason “why [refugees] keep silent” despite being aware of unfair working terms or conditions, this lack of proficiency in Hebrew and English also means that “some people [...] don't know” when they are being exploited. These comments notwithstanding, some participants acknowledged that despite their lack of Hebrew proficiency, they found certain Israeli employers to be “very, very respectful.”

While the focus group discussions revealed the refugees' expectation that educational opportunities would be readily available for those who wanted to study in Israel, there was a difference in opinion about which particular parties should provide these opportunities. As with issues related to housing, some participants believed that, as is ostensibly the case in “European countries,” it is the government's responsibility to provide education and make it accessible to refugees. Other participants said that organizations were responsible to “help the people [by having] classes for Hebrew or English,” and needed to both “check places of education” and to communicate subsequent information about respective opportunities to refugees. One man even requested that the researchers directly tell the ARDC to engage in such checking so that

“[refugees] can go to learn.” Finally, one participant identified both the government and organizations in Israel as responsible for the language proficiency of refugees and, ultimately, for their ability for communication and social integration. Again referencing Europe, this participant said that a camp should be built by these parties in which “they teach you the local language, for example Hebrew here now, [...] and give you [a] document [certifying that] you know Hebrew so that you can communicate with people and [...] know the traditions of the people and their cultures.”

Health

Access to health and medical services was also frequently cited as a fundamental necessity for participants, though one which they perceived as extremely difficult to access. Several participants contextualized their need of medicine with reference to untreated injuries they sustained while crossing the border fence into Israel. One man detailed how he “broke his foot at the border” and now has trouble walking, while another said that “When I was in the Sinai to cross the border with Israel, the wire of the border cut me.” Although one respondent described the discomfort he felt from a “serious disease inside his stomach,” the participants generally did not offer significant detail about the maladies from which they suspected they suffered. Nonetheless, there appeared to be a general consensus about the fact that “some people [among them] are sick,” thereby highlighting their need for medical care.

Participants cited financial issues as the main barrier to accessing viable health care in Israel. They repeatedly described the process of visiting doctors and hospitals as “expensive,” “difficult,” and as a “big problem.” In particular, one man believed that his financial situation precluded the possibility of receiving treatment for his condition, saying that “Even if I go to hospital they say I need a lot of money. I don't have money. What can I do?” Another man who *did* visit several doctors reiterated this reality of financial preclusion and said it was the reason that he “did not get the medicine [he] required.”

In addition to the financial barriers to health care, participants also suggested that health complications can in turn make the prospect of obtaining employment all the more difficult, thereby causing a ripple effect of multifaceted consequences in the lives of refugees. One man

articulated this process in saying that “If I am sick and I am not able to work, the situation is so bad; [...] I can't get the money to eat, I can't [get] a home to sleep – [it is] so difficult for me.”

Given the difficulties which they experience vis-à-vis acquiring health care services, participants expressed confusion and frustration about why both the government and Israeli organizations do not do more to ensure that they, “as refugees,” receive relevant services. One man in particular was visibly angry and said that he “didn't see any organization to stand on [his] side,” despite and perpetuating the fact that he “has a problem for the backbone [and] for the arm” and lives in Levinsky Park. While respondents did not specify the nature of the role they believed the government and organizations should have, they expected these external parties to be responsible for ensuring that health issues of refugees were addressed, as is ostensibly the case “in European countries.” In fact, whereas one participant requested the researchers to “tell the organization” about health-related issues facing refugees, another directly addressed the researchers and succinctly stated “I am sick. How can you help?” Furthermore, several participants expressed that it was their “right” as refugees to “get protection” and “social insurance,” and that such things “should” be in place in order to ensure access to reliable health coverage.

Food / Drink

While the necessity of food and drink is intuitively obvious and while it was certainly alluded to during the focus discussion groups, it appeared with less frequency than other needs. Nonetheless, participants did express difficulty accessing reliable sources of food and water. Although the researchers intentionally did not probe refugees' strategies of food and water acquisition, participants elucidated three particular methods. First, one participant emphasized the role of social networks in obtaining sustenance and said that “Sometimes I go to beg from my friends; they give me a little bit of money to buy food.” Second, participants mentioned that there is a church organization that occasionally provides food for refugees on Fridays. Finally, one man intimated that refugees got food and drink from a particular restaurant which charged “one shekel,” but added that this restaurant was currently in operation only twice a week.

Once again, participants expected organizations to bear the responsibility for their needs

relative to food and drink. One man said that “If the organizations help the people [...], everyone will get [the] food” they need. Despite this organizational expectation, another respondent said that he “did not know what organizations [could] help” in this manner.

Discussion

Homeless African refugees in Levinsky Park (hereafter referred to as “refugees”) have a distinct self-perception of themselves as *refugees* fleeing politically unsafe and disastrous humanitarian conditions in their home countries. Refugees assumed that Israel would satisfactorily address their needs by providing asylum, services, and rights because they held favorable albeit idealistic perceptions of how other countries (especially those in Europe) respond to the plight of refugees, and because conditions in Israel were ostensibly more accommodating prior to December 2010.

Nonetheless, though refugees have found a modicum of asylum in the form of safety in Israel, their other perceived and self-prioritized needs involving work, housing, education, health, and food/drink have *not* been met satisfactorily. Specifically, the harsh reality of these unmet needs is illustrated by the fact that refugees have insecure means of financial income, they sleep in the park, they do not have access to education, they suffer from untreated injuries and sicknesses, and they do not have reliable sources of food and drink.

Although refugees certainly have an understanding of the substantive independence of these needs, they are especially aware of their interrelatedness. For example, they correlate education with work insofar as proficiency in either Hebrew or English is considered to be an “antibody” against exploitation in employment. Similarly, they perceive a patent correlation between health and work whereby the inability to access treatment for injuries and sicknesses is a significant hindrance to securing and maintaining employment.

Though the reality of these correlations is certainly troubling for refugees, they especially emphasize and prioritize the role that the 2A5 conditional release visa has with respect to their

other needs. Specifically, they cite the visa's no work clause, and their subsequent inability to obtain income, as the *primary* obstruction to the realization of their housing, education, health care, and food/drink needs. Presumably, it is for this reason that refugees do not consider their visa as legitimate insofar as it precludes the possibility of work and income.

Given that refugees perceive the satisfaction of their needs to be contingent upon visa stipulations, and that the Israeli government determines these stipulations, the refugees believe that the government is both culpable for their unmet needs and ultimately responsible for guaranteeing their *right* to have these needs met. In their minds, the current visa stipulations are a direct consequence of the fact that the government is not "convinced" that they are actually refugees. Therefore, refugees consider it incumbent upon the government to first recognize the legitimacy of their status, and they assume that the reasons for such recognition are intuitive given their background and migration journey.

Nonetheless, amidst absence of this recognition, refugees also expect organizations to play a supplemental role to the government in terms of service provision and the addressing of needs. They feel significant anger toward organizations for "not doing anything," despite possessing both the information and resources to actually do so. This being said, refugees appear to overestimate the capacities of organizations, as well as underestimate these organizations' financial and service-related limitations. Generally, refugees are neither aware of the current existence and services of refugee organizations, nor are they clear about the specific roles and responsibilities organizations *should* have in order to ameliorate their conditions.

Despite the fact that refugees hold external parties such as the government and organizations responsible for meeting their needs, this in no way should detract from the palpable sense of individual responsibility they have for their own lives. Virtually all of the participants in the focus group discussions demonstrated a strong desire to work and appeared to have taken proactive steps to secure employment in Israel. Nonetheless, refugees believe that structural barriers and perceived service gaps such as the government's visa stipulations and organizational oversight, respectively, prevent them from actualizing this personal responsibility.

Consequently, refugees feel a high degree of helplessness in terms of meeting their own needs, feel a great dependence on external parties to meet these needs, and feel tremendous confusion and frustration about why assistance from these parties is not more forthcoming. All in all, refugees feel disappointment and have a distinct sense that their needs are neglected, ignored, and unimportant in Israel. This sense, coupled with the fact that these necessities are so fundamental, critical, and urgent to refugees makes the prospect of migrating to another country or even returning home all the more plausible.

Conclusion

While this study elucidates the fact that homeless African refugees in Levinsky Park have immense and immediate needs which are not being sufficiently addressed in Israel (participants repeatedly described life as being “so difficult” throughout the focus group discussions), it also suggests that meeting these needs is *not* an insurmountable task. In a general sense, the value of this study is in providing an “ear to the ground” for various African refugee service providers in Israel to further understand what these refugees currently perceive as important, what they require, and the emotionally and psychologically taxing effects which result from these requirements being unfulfilled. Furnishing this understanding gives service providers a helpful frame of reference by which to more effectively determine and evaluate current and prospective service offerings. Ultimately, enhancing the effectiveness of service offerings in this manner is beneficial to homeless African refugees and will ameliorate their social integration; this will likely help subvert the stigma that they are merely “infiltrators”⁵ and idlers and allow Israeli society the opportunity to benefit from their participation and contribution.

In a more specific sense, this study suggests particular recommendations for both the Israeli government and for various organizations (such as the ARDC) whose mandates orient them toward the plight of African refugees in the country. While it is to the credit of the Israeli

⁵ This word is actually how the Israeli government refers to refugees who seek asylum in Israel and is the basis for a proposed “Anti-Infiltration Law” which would either subject refugees to expulsion or imprisonment. In January of 2011, Benjamin Netanyahu was quoted as saying “The infiltrators conquered Eilat and Arad, and they are conquering Tel Aviv from north to south. Only a small amount are actually refugees. A stream of refugees threaten to wash away our achievements and harm our existence as a Jewish and democratic state” (Kestler-D’Amours, 2011). For further information on the specifics of the Anti-Infiltration Law, see Amnesty International, 2011.

government that basic asylum in the form of protection and safety is generally accorded to African refugees, the government needs to put forth a far more concerted effort to ensure that their rights are upheld and their basic necessities met. Specifically, it is imperative⁶ that the government first rescind the no work clause from the 2A5 conditional release visas in order to enable refugees to obtain income and to subsequently empower them to address needs related to housing, education, health, and food/drink.

Second, the government needs to take a more proactive role with respect to both the provision and oversight of services to African refugees.⁷ It is entirely unacceptable to merely shuttle refugees from facilities such as Saharonym to South Tel Aviv, only to leave them to fend for themselves once they arrive. This seemingly “hands-off” and “out of sight out of mind” approach is all the more irresponsible given Israel’s obligation to refugees as a signatory to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the difficulties that African refugees flee from in their home countries and experience en route to Israel, as well as given the fact that refugees usually have *no* idea what to do upon arrival in Tel Aviv. Consequently, the government should at the very least provide refugees with detailed information about which services they may avail themselves of, if not develop and implement structures and supports (especially related to housing, health, and food/drink) for refugees to access when they disembark at the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station. Without such mechanisms in place, the government is doing little else than exacerbating the vulnerability of African refugees, placing them on a pathway to homelessness in Levinsky Park, and impoverishing and marginalizing the South Tel Aviv locale.

Assuming that the aforementioned governmental recommendations take time to implement, various refugee organizations should persist in advocating on behalf of the rights and needs of African refugees in Israel, especially by continually lobbying the government to rescind the no work clause of the 2A5 conditional release visa. These organizations ought also to play a

⁶ “Without the right to work, [it is] estimated [that] 25,000 asylum seekers [...] will be at risk of homelessness and the social consequences of poverty” (African Refugee Development Center, 2011b, p. 7).

⁷ We are aware of the proposed government plan to build a detention facility in the Negev which is capable of holding around 10,000 “infiltrators.” However, we neither think this plan is in the best interests of African refugees, nor that it suitably fulfils Israel’s obligations to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. For further information on the proposed facility and the reasons for our position, see African Refugee Development Center, 2011b.

supplemental role to the public sector vis-à-vis service offerings to refugees. First, organizations need to bridge the information gap that exists between themselves and African refugees by more effectively marketing their existence and their services. Such bridging may occur through a variety of means including a regular question and answer session in Levinsky Park, and the establishment of an information board at the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station and in the park detailing organizational locations and services to refugees. Ultimately, organizations need to more intentionally communicate the information and resources they have to refugees in the park.

Second, organizations should develop more effective reception services for African refugees who arrive at the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station. While we acknowledge that organizations have resource limitations and often experience inertia with respect to their programs and services, they should increasingly endeavor to offer *immediate* provision for basic humanitarian needs related to housing, food/drink, and health care, in order to counteract the likelihood that refugees will become homeless in the park. This immediate provision will alleviate the pressure on refugees to manage *all* of their needs simultaneously upon arrival in Tel Aviv, thereby giving them enough stability and security to enable them to focus on securing work and employment. This provision will also foster refugees' awareness of and familiarity with organizations, which will benefit them throughout their time in Israel.

Third, organizational budgeting and service priority should be given to issues of housing, education, health, and food/drink, in keeping with the self-perceived needs of refugees in Levinsky Park. Admittedly, though organizations may place these issues in a different hierarchy of importance according to their respective mission and activities, these issues *must* be priorities for organizations that work with African refugees in Tel Aviv. Last but certainly not least, organizations need to facilitate work and employment opportunities for refugees, as this is their primary need. This facilitation may involve researching potential opportunities, subsequently "plugging" in refugees into these opportunities, as well providing resources such as language classes, information on worker rights, and employee advocacy, all of which make refugees less susceptible to exploitation.

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