CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

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Bridging Solitudes: Partnership Challenges in Canadian Refugee Service Delivery

Introduction

Claudia María Vargas

Although it would be wonderful to get to the point where we would not have to consider service provision to refugees, the reality is that there is a continuous and escalating need to do so as conflicts around the world continue to displace thousands of people.[1] While the number of people encountering dislocation swell, countries seem to be responding by restrictive asylum policies and by limiting services, a phenomenon occurring in the first country of entry and in asylum granting countries. (For a thorough discussion on the legal restrictions adopted by Canada, the United States, and the European Union, see Cooper, forthcoming; and the article by the same author in this issue). In spite of these and other obstacles, nonprofit organizations strive to deliver a variety of services to refugees. This challenge has intensified with the shift from a welfare state framework to a market oriented state. Thus, nonprofit organizations have had to step in to fill a void left by a slashing of government services (Welsch 1999; Salamon 1994).

In such a setting, key questions emerge. How do non-governmental organizations (NGOs) deliver much needed services in a time of shrinking budgets and restricted policies? What strategies do NGOs use to meet these obstacles within an ethic of service? In other words, what challenges do service providers encounter in delivering serv-

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ices while trying to ensure organizational sustainability? These questions must be explored at both the points of service level and the interorganizational level. More specifically, we need to explore how service providers connect with or bridge with refugees as well as how service organizations bridge with each other. (Although it is beyond the discussion of this essay, it is important to acknowledge that there is a growing literature on nonprofit organizations that considers the relationship of NGOs with private and government agencies [Herman and Associates 1994]).

Exploring these questions generates a thesis: The challenge of the dynamic and pressure-filled environment in refugee service delivery can only be addressed by partnerships. Partnerships, though, can be effectively established and maintained if, and only if, an ethic of service and a culture of cooperation is developed based on trust, commitment, and effective cultural mediation at the direct service delivery as well as the interorganizational levels. This is particularly critical in difficult economic times.

The contributions in this issue represent various perspectives from practitioners and academics. The practitioners include cultural interpreters, NGO managers, psychologists, and a school principal. This blend of practitioners and academics also bridge a much needed connection between research and practice. Furthermore, the pieces represent the multidisciplinary approach required in serving refugees, though not the full range of services.

Why the Need for Nonprofit Organizations?

Since the rise of political demand for downsizing of government and reduction of public spending, nonprofits have been growing to provide services traditionally delivered by government entities. According to Weisbrod, "Nonprofits perform the kinds of functions typically identified with government—helping the disadvantaged, providing social services, ... However, when populations are very diverse, services that satisfy the majority may leave many people severely under-satisfied; nonprofits are thus understandable as an alternative mechanism for providing collective services" (1997, p. 542). Nonprofits perform an essential function in refugee service delivery, especially when access to services is restricted by status of the asylum process, or the unfortunate ones who are referred as "refugees in orbit" (Gallagher et al. 1990).

The contemporary context in Canada presents a diversity of people and needs. It merits a brief analysis with particular attention to the problems faced by nonprofit organizations that serve refugees. Recent fiscal and legal constraints complicate delivery of services. The outside pressures experienced by NGOs affect their operations and their ability to deliver quality services. The pressures also affect the health of the organizations and their ability to survive continuing cutbacks. What has become evident from research interviews is that NGOs delivering services to refugees are often sustained by the quality of the people that operate them.[2] However, as Cooper asks, "At what point is an organization unable to perform its mandates, is it that last 2 percent cut?"

On the other hand, as Herman asserts, "... the future of nonprofit charitable organization, in the United States and Canada, is likely to be determined less by organizationally focused actions than the extent to which nonprofit organizations build more cooperative or more competitive sectors" (1994, p. 616). But, how do organizations build and support cooperative endeavours in a fiscally lean context, when organizations seem to be stretched to the maximum? "The organizations that constitute a nonprofit community [v. an industry] understand that they are stewards of the larger community's resources and instruments for meeting the public needs of the larger community. Fulfilling such a role requires that members of the nonprofit community often act in cooperative ways" (Herman 1994, p. 617).

Although collaboration and cooperation is desirable, these features may be imposed from outside the organizations. Lofty sounding goals like building partnerships may create possibilities but they may also produce less helpful results, including competition and conflict.

Whether the pressure to cooperate comes from outside funding sources, legislative mandates (Herman 1994) or from the need for service delivery, the question still remains, how can we align the mission of the various organizations involved? More specifically, how do the many potential partner groups build consensus on what the common mission is to be? Which route collaborative efforts take will sometimes depend on appropriate cultural mediation of each organization's goals and mission anchored on an ethic of service. This is what Spigelblatt (in this issue) refers to as "organizational cultural mediation."

Cooperation or Competition Among Nonprofit Organizations?

Although common sense may dictate that nonprofit organizations should embrace a cooperative or collaborative model over a competitive one, all models present their own problems (Weisbrod 1997, p. 543). The competition may be due to "fiscal pressures on both types of organizations," nonprofit and government. Fiscal pressures may lead some NGOs to expand their activities into areas traditionally the domain of 'for-profit enterprises', e.g. consulting, thus moving away from their original, charitable goals. Still others may suffer changes in management and therefore in mission. Shifting emphasis, even by degrees, from service to income generating goals in one organization may weaken or destroy previously established partnerships.

At the same time, in the area of refugee service delivery cooperation (and alliances) among numerous NGOs, in some cases, have been sparked by the threat of severe cuts in government allocations. Creative arrangements among non-profits organizations have also been developed as a way to provide necessary services without one organization carrying the whole financial burden. That was, for example, the case of the Ottawa Board of Education's partnership with the Ottawa-Carleton Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) (Vargas 1999).

For cooperation to work, an ethic of service (Jeavons 1994) by all NGOs involved must be firmly established. As Thomas (1994) states, NGOs need to strive to build and sustain a culture of service. However, even when NGOs are committed to, and practice an ethic of service, and though they may seek to concentrate on collaboration and cooperation, other factors may erode their ability to do so. One significant factor is the yearly funding cycle. Grant writing and contract renewals consume much needed resources in service delivery, though they are necessary for a NGO's sheer survival. Unfortunately, these tasks also compete with organizational collaborative efforts.

Herman identifies three essential principles to local intrasector cooperation. However, cooperation is only possible if NGOs can work and act as a community (Herman 1994, pp. 623-624). Among Herman's principles one is particularly significant. "Grant-makers will need to commit multiyear funding to the project and be willing to fund continuing operating costs for some organizations (rather than funding only or mostly innovative projects or start-up costs)" (Herman 1994, p. 624). Based on research interviews Professor Cooper and I have conducted, this is rarely done in Canada or elsewhere.[3] Instead, a yearly funding cycle seems to be the norm, especially for resettlement funds. Ongoing competition for these funds tends to pull NGOs in different directions.

Beyond that, there is a long overdue and pervasive need for organizational renewal. Organizational renewal is a set of techniques organizations employ to help their people and the group as a whole to recover from stresses, avoid burnout, and reenergize for renewed effort. For the past ten years, when we have posed the question, "How do you deal with organizational renewal?" The response is blank faces looking at each other, followed by, "There is none. [long silence!] We just support each other."[4] The silence seems to come from the surprise of such a question, because the issue had never been considered: "What a novel idea!" Clearly, the support comes from individuals, and not from the organizations. In fact, none of the organizations where Professor Cooper and I have conducted interviews had any allocation for organizational renewal. Instead, burnout rings a common tune.

What, then, keeps refugee service providers going in such an environment? The articles submitted by the contributors of this issue suggest two alternative routes towards fostering a "community of nonprofit organizations." Partnerships are explored at various levels: 1) partnerships among nonprofit organizations and 2) partnerships at the direct service level. First, partnerships among organizations may include partnerships with either government agencies or service providers from other sectors. Second, partnerships at the point of service may be with a client in a therapeutic context, with a family or with students in a school setting, or with colleagues from other fields in delivering services to children with disabilities. Before embarking on this discussion, it is important to acknowledge that a multidisciplinary, holistic approach is necessary in refugee service delivery because, given their experiences, refugees have a multitude of needs, including housing, employment, education, health, mental health, and occupational training or retraining, among others.

There are two other critical factors to consider in delivery of services to refugees, the need to build trust and the role of cultural diversity. Because refugees have frequently been betrayed by the state in their homelands, trust is a real issue. The cultural diversity they represent complicates interactions. In dealing with health care providers, refugees may experience disbelief about why a doctor or a psychologist would want to help them; "there must be a hidden agenda." In 20 percent of survivors of torture, a physician participated in the torture (U.S. Committee for Refugees 1999). Therefore it is not surprising that refugees naturally respond with fear and mistrust in the asylum country.

The issue of trust is equally important at the interorganizational level among refugee service organizations. Since many of these NGOs are staffed by former refugees or immigrants, because

they embrace an advocacy role, and operate within a rising anti-immigrant sentiment, trust is an essential ingredient. Furthermore, in terms of organizational behaviour when building partnerships or networks, stakeholders from the organizations involved need to know that all are entering the endeavour in which survival depends on putting all the cards on the table. The strength of the partnerships is contingent upon sharing a mission and having no hidden agenda. However, we need to ask, are partnerships enough during resource shrinking periods? Are there other approaches that we need to consider to sustain nonprofit organizations? Let us consider the concepts of partnerships and networks in this essay.

Interorganizational Partnerships or Networks

Among the contributors, two address the issue of interorganizational partnerships and networks. The partnership created between OCISO and the Ottawa-Carleton School Districts, analyzed by **Lucila Spigelblatt** focuses on the creation of a specific and particularly effective programme, the Multicultural Liaison Programme (MLP). Although a success by all accounts—testimony from students, parents, community members, teachers and principals—it merits exploration of what constituted the most difficult areas in the embryonic stages of this partnership. Spigelblatt demonstrates that it was not the mission that created challenges, but the subtleties in communication and the diverse meanings allocated to the same words by the programme's clients and its other stakeholders. Spigelblatt artfully illustrates another dimension of cultural mediation: *organizational* cultural mediation. This is required to align meanings and therefore goals for both of the organizations involved, none of which would have been possible without a foundation based on trust. What is also interesting is that the direct service experience informed or confirmed the dynamics occurring interorganizationally. Her essay draws a parallel between the direct service experience and the interorganizational workings, both of which depend on cultural interpretation.

Phillip J. Cooper explains that the interorganizational relationships among refugee service providers are in reality even more complex than simply a number of two-way partnerships. The political, fiscal, and legal pressures on contemporary Canadian refugee services have forced both government and non-for-profit organizations into complex service networks. These sets of relationships among federal and provincial ministries, city governments, school boards, health care organizations, housing agencies, counselling services, full service refugee and immigrant settlement organizations, and more specialized NGOs seeking to address particular requirements of battered women, survivors of torture, or others with special needs are mechanisms that help us to meet the need to do more with less. However, these networks create complex inter-dependencies. The networks themselves must be managed. Organizations that must operate within these networks must learn how to do so, including the need to recognize the impact of network operations on the internal workings of their own organization. After explaining the contextual forces that have increasingly forced refugee service providers into networks, Cooper outlines the critical characteristics and coping skills for network service delivery and highlights some of the internal challenges about which NGO participants need to be aware.

Partnerships: Multiple and Diverse in Direct Service

A very popular concept in education parlance but not an easy one to implement, **Patricia Irving** and **Claudia Maria Vargas** explore what it takes to create "a community of learners." In order to promote and sustain a community of learners at the school level, an organization requires a principal whose leadership style is bold enough to reculture a school by expanding its horizons far enough to include other stakeholders but also a principal who adopts an ethic of service and equality. Inclusion of all stakeholders depends on appropriate cultural interpretation to engage parents, community members, teachers and multidisciplinary professionals from other agencies in the learning enterprise. As other contributors have pointed out, partnerships can be created if trust is crystallized. It is then that all stakeholders participate and contribute, benefiting from each other's cultural wealth, knowledge, and expertise to support educational endeavours. In synthesis, for the concept of a community of learners to work in a diverse setting, cultural interpretation is necessary to tap the potential of the plurality represented (Genesee 1994, Coelho 1994; Richman 1998). For principals, the crux of the matter is how to balance so many competing demands.

The need for cultural interpretation is further substantiated by the article by **Sherman Chan**, **Hardeep Thind**, and **Lesley Lim**. Through the Community Youth Outreach Programme of the Surrey Delta Immigrant Services Society, Community Youth Outreach Workers provide cultural interpretation and extra-curricular activities as a bridge to immigrant and refugee youth and their families. What is evident is that Canadian students and teachers benefit as much as the newcomers from the cultural wealth the new arrivals bring. Immigrant parents and community members who want to join the school community, do so through the Outreach Workers. In fact, parents demonstrate their gratitude and appreciation of Canadian teachers by organizing Teacher Appreciation celebrations or Chinese New Year's festivities. The various strategies developed by the programme indicate a clear attempt to preclude cultural discontinuity or cultural conflicts while enhancing the contributions of immigrants to the Canadian society. The success of the programme has depended on the bridging or partnering of school efforts with those of the ethnocultural communities in the British Columbia area.

The last three contributions are focused on serving refugees with special

needs, children and adults, filling a void in the literature, especially in the area of disabilities. **Ester Cole** discusses the "Building Bridges Programme," implemented in Canada as well as overseas (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo) as an alternative to serving children who have been traumatized by war. Because the histories of these children are unknown, it is difficult for schools to assess who is in need of mental health interventions. The "Building Bridges Programmes" renders a series of age-appropriate, classroom- based activities while affording an opportunity for healing to those who are scarred, whether close to the battlefield or in the host country. Its goals are to enhance resilience and bolster coping skills in children through art, drama, games, storytelling, and buddy teams. The Programme resulted from a partnership between the International Children's Institute, a NGO, other cross-sectional organizations, schools and mental health professionals. Programme goals include building home-school partnerships by engaging the parents in panel discussion to ally cultural expectations with school expectations. The effectiveness of the Programme has been documented by qualitative and quantitative analysis of data gathered from participating schools in Toronto. Results indicate a positive impact on children's self-esteem and coping skills, social integration, and academic outcomes through a holistic approach.

The article by **Huong Thai** and **Afarin Beglari** focuses on addressing the needs of children who are refugees and who have disabilities. The need for cultural interpretation is more intense in an area in which so many factors interact: diverse cultural perceptions of disability, complex multidisciplinary teams, home visits, special schools, and different and often challenging peer perceptions, among others. In circumstances in which parents may be overwhelmed by language and cultural differences, accentuated when interacting with professional from diverse disciplines each speaking a specialized jargon, cultural interpreters play an important role in mediating for the student, the parents, and the professionals. Even when the best professional practice is in place, cultural subtleties can undermine the best plans. Parents who may be struggling with other issues associated with their situation, may be bombarded by the demands of a child with a disability compounded with the need to follow a different set of instructions from each professional involved. All of these dynamics are mediated by cultural symbols, values and attitudes. Cultural interpreters often find themselves embracing an advocacy role as they give voice to the voiceless, the children and the parents as they synchronize the goals of the professionals with those of the parents for the well being of the child. This kind of cultural mediation illustrates maturity, sophistication, and experience built over a number of years that tested the foundation of trust and empathy. Cultural interpreters of this caliber promote partnerships between families having children with disabilities and multidisciplinary teams. The quality and diversity of interactions discussed in this piece include and surpass the suggestions for interpreters in the literature (Struwe 1994; Kayser 1998; Richman 1998).

The Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture (VAST) presents a valuable perspective in the article by **Mahshid Esfandiari** and **Frances McQueen**. Survivors of torture, children and adults, face a more dramatic adjustment process as they struggle with even more intense and chronic pain and injuries than other newcomers (Marsella et al.1994; Leavitt and Fox 1993; Kinzie et al. 1998; Locke et al. 1996; McCloskey and Southwick 1996; Cunningham and Cunnin- gham 1997; Sack et al. 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998; among others). Therefore, working with survivors requires embracing a particular set of standards grounded on common therapeutic principles. The authors share VAST Therapeutic Principles for Care complemented with a discussion of some of the critical ones. The authors use case studies to illustrate the functioning of these principles while stressing the importance of using a variety of therapeutic strategies, including bodywork. Given that torture rapes the body as well as the psyche, a holistic approach is particularly underscored. Culturally appropriate therapies, psychological and bodywork, are complemented with social interactions with other refugees or staff members. Central to all of this is being respectful to the refugee's wishes in the healing process. Cultural interpreters who are carefully screened and selected—being attentive to gender compatibility regarding ethnocultural background, political standing, religion, and belief system, among others—support these approaches (Richman 1998). Thus, VAST staff allows the survivor ownership of the process as he or she begins to recognize and to meet personal needs. Adhering to these principles facilitates a partnership or bridge between the survivor and the therapist(s).

Conclusion

The contributions for this issue afford various perspectives in service delivery concerns, those of practitioners and academics. Together they offer a deeper understanding of the challenges encountered by nonprofit organizations, as the work of researchers can become a bridge connecting the lonely struggles of service providers. At the same time, practitioners enrich the work of academics by connecting theory and practice. Regardless of the perspective, what is evident is that partnerships are created between client and service provider, among organizations, governmental and nonprofit. The commonality among these relationships is: embracing an ethic of service that creates a space for cooperation. But, these partnerships need to be sustained by pillars of trust, commitment, cultural mediation and fiscal stability. Sustainability of the programmes discussed is contingent upon funding, a vulnerability indicated by all contributors. One last word on cultural mediation is its pervasiveness at multiple levels, the interpersonal, interdisciplinary as well as the interorganizational level, especially at the intersectoral level.

A common thread among all the articles in this issue is the significance of cultural understanding, trust, commitment, an ethic of service, and a willingness to build partnerships in spite of a number of risks. Therefore, any one who embarks in this field of service delivery needs also to be attentive to the complexities posed by partnerships and networks. ■

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Notes

1. In an interview, a refugee service provider captured the role that Prof. Cooper and I play for service providers as "breaking the solitudes [or isolation]" of service providers. As they are immersed in taxing demands for services, service providers experience a solitude or isolation from each other, or from colleagues who may be experiencing similar challenges in other localities.
2. Interviews [and conversations] conducted in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Ottawa and the British Columbia area, December 1990-December 1999.
3. Interviews conducted in Ottawa and the British Columbia area, 1999.
4. Interviews in Ottawa, Canada, 1993-1999, British Columbia area, 1999. □

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