

REPORT ON WORKSHOP HELD AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY
FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL FAMINE CENTER
REFUGEE YOUTH AND COMMUNITY IN BOSTON
NEGOTIATING SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

April 11, 2003.

Boston is a major resettlement city for many refugees coming from crisis and war affected countries around the world. One of the major issues that face refugee families in their acculturation and resettlement process in the city is how to give meaningful support and attention to the special needs and factors that affect their youth as they settle into a different school and cultural environment.

The meeting brought together participants representing refugee organizations, community leaders, teachers, foster parents, academics and research institutes based in Boston.

Themes posed for the day were:

Review of current financial and political issues affecting refugee resettlement in Boston.

- School and community relations
- Relationships within the home
- Emerging needs and issues affecting refugee/youth/community relations.

The meeting began with a general discussion around the aftermath of September 11 and the new budget cuts that are affecting Massachusetts. Two sets of issues were identified as being of concern.

- a) Rising tide of racism and harassment of refugees in the aftermath of Sept 11 and war in Afghanistan. Cases both within school and between community members and police.
- b) Sweeping budget cuts which are resulting in loss of vital programs, services and resources within school and community agencies.

Participants agreed that much more advocacy needs to be done to work with police and welfare organizations to sensitize them to refugee issues and train them to understand the culture and home situations of refugees and especially to understand the religious context of refugee lives.

At the same time advocacy work needs to be done around the long-term effects of the cuts and ways for finding alternative resources and mechanisms for providing the resources that are being lost.

The second and third sessions focused on home school relations and relations within communities. Again the issue of sensitizing teachers and school workers on the home background and socio-cultural context of refugees was stressed. A key factor that was identified was the lack of recognition by schools of refugee value of education and desire for upward mobility. Language difficulties were often misunderstood as general educational incompetence and lack of interest in education. Refugees also come from a variety of different educational settings. Some come from countries with poor educational facilities, some from countries with much higher standards than in America. Thus though a child may be poor in English, they are far more advanced in maths, science and other subjects than their US peers and a good deal of their frustration and difficulties in the school environment may stem from pure boredom and lack of challenge.

Participants representing community organizations shared experiences around the types of initiatives that they had developed to help refugee families support their youth at school. Examples included homework clubs, Saturday schools where language home and culture training was combined with support to schoolwork; parent liaison groups and other initiatives. It was stressed how difficult it was to support youth when the school day itself was so short and when often both parents were working, most at very difficult hours. At the same time the language and educational constraints of refugee adults also acted as a hindrance.

Home relations were also raised as a problem. Many families have difficulties adjusting to the cultures of youth in America and feel very lost when their own children adopt mannerisms and values that are in direct contrast to their own. The greatest fear is in the alienation that they feel from their young. A second feature is dealing with the “anti education” culture or value which they experience amongst their American peers and which is in contrast to their own desires for educational attainment. Many participants talked about violence between youth and their parents and also the kinds of violence that the youth were involved in if they joined gangs or were victimized by others. Again it was stressed that welfare, police and school authorities often did not understand the real causes behind these issues and made situations worse by not consulting community organizations or seeking help from country experts.

An area of concern was raised about the new program for Somali Bantus which was to proceed during the summer of 2003. A presentation from Badu Oketu of Tufts university raised some issues regarding the difficulties this group faced in Somalia and the refugee camps in Kenya and what they would likely face here in the United States. Participants agreed that a special meeting on Somali Bantus could be organized for the Boston area welfare officers and schools by inviting some Somali area specialists who are currently residing and teaching several colleges in the greater Massachusetts area.

The last session focused on the special needs of youth from war-affected countries. Within Boston there are now a few Centers and Institutions who specialize in working with those communities and individuals who have been subject to torture, violence and other forms of abuse which have resulted in them seeking asylum. The cultural sensitivities with dealing with forms of labeling were discussed and shared. Again it was felt that enabling these centers to network with country experts in the area would be of great help to them to understand the culture and attitudes to medical and psycho-social issues of refugees.

For many youth a key aspect of their refugee experience has been that they have had a great deal of responsibility for their family often even being the chief wage earner. For many of them to be in the United States and not allowed to work till sixteen can be frustrating and demoralizing. Schools also need to be sensitive to the fact that they may have been subject to physical and mental abuse whilst in their home country or been witness to such events. The Boston University center of African Studies Outreach program was mentioned as a good resource for teachers wishing to know more about countries and situations in Africa. A further destabilizing factor was the constant worry about the family's immigration status. In addition since September 11 many youth have themselves been questioned by police or witnessed family members being detained around immigration issues.

The meeting concluded with an agreement that a more permanent forum should exist that could continue these kinds of discussions; bring together the academic and practitioner community; act as a resource to agencies and community organizations and advocate for the special needs of refugee youth in the Boston area.

Participants agreed to continue meeting in the future and discussed the idea of naming themselves Boston Advocates for Refugee Youth. (BARY). One participant volunteered to set up a web page for future discussions and other volunteered to network with other organizations and spread the word about forming an organization. It was agreed that the Feinstein International Famine Center would continue to facilitate and host meetings and encourage Tufts University students and others to support refugee organizations and for faculty to support and initiate research that addressed the needs of refugees in the United States as well as overseas. An announcement was made about a meeting in Lowell organized by Brandeis University which was to launch a new program focusing on immigration issues.

August 2003.