

Wellington Mackey
HMRT 400: Human Rights Capstone

Capstone Project
Refugee Interactive Sessions in English (RISE)

Summary of Project

What duties do members of a society owe to refugees who have resettled in their communities? What rights can refugees claim? Hannah Arendt once wrote that the condition of statelessness is the “fundamental deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective.”¹ What many refugees have experienced is not merely the retraction of the protections of their home state, but a place where their personhood is still feasible, a place where the words “I belong” is still applicable. That place is called a community, and restoring the freedoms and privileges it provides should be the ultimate goal of refugee resettlement.

The Refugee Interactive Sessions in English (RISE) Project at St. John’s Episcopal Church is an English tutoring program designed to promote community building and to facilitate participative community integration strategies as clients increase their knowledge of the English language. There is extensive research to suggest that becoming proficient in the language of their host country is essential to refugees for creating and sustaining lasting relationships outside their immediate circles, finding and sustaining adequate employment, and maintaining social and psychological well-being. R.I.S.E will also serve as a platform for cultural self-expression as we

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt, 1968), 296.

share recipes, engage in the performing and visual arts, and discuss our goals and aspirations. R.I.S.E. is a family-oriented program that will emphasize plurality, tolerance, and acceptance, the pillars of a healthy and diverse community.

Background

After interning at IRIS this summer, I witnessed first-hand how myopic and minimalist the approach taken by current U.S. refugee policy is to refugee resettlement. Its stated purpose is to help refugees “achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.”² Consequently, the services provided by local resettlement affiliates like IRIS focus almost exclusively on finding early employment for refugees, to avoid lengthy reliance on cash assistance. In most cases, as soon as a refugee sets foot on American soil they are essentially “on the clock” and finding a job, any job is the highest priority. Specific benefits are set to expire at the end of a year and, in some instances, as soon as 90 days.

Not surprisingly, there is a tension between this push for rapid self-sufficiency and the goal of lasting and effective integration into new communities. The Federal government’s animating goal of admitting only the most vulnerable refugee populations, many of whom have experienced trauma, have physical or mental needs, or have been out of the labor market for extended periods of time while displaced, exacerbates the problem.

² Code of Federal Regulations, Refugee Resettlement Program – Introduction – Basis and Purpose of the Program, title 45, part 400, subpart A, sec. 400.1 (b) states: “It is the purpose of this program to provide for the effective resettlement of refugees and to assist them to achieve economic self-sufficiency as soon as possible.”

The RISE Project is a direct response to this dilemma by acting as a bridge between refugees and the New Haven community. It will feature a unique curriculum that harnesses the power of communication, compassion and cultural sharing. By utilizing English instruction as a vehicle to build trust, RISE will positively enhance the community integration. If we promulgate this approach and other organizations duplicate St. John's efforts, The R.I.S.E. project will have created a roadmap to efficiently extend the public-private partnership between local governments, resettlement affiliates, and civil society.

Locating R.I.S.E in the Human Rights Discourse

The right to asylum, as it is frequently interpreted by State parties to the UN International Protocol Regarding Refugees, is often framed as a negative right. For nations interested in protecting their sovereignty this refers mostly to a right to non-refoulement. This is a refugee's right not to be sent back to a site of persecution, but little else. Nations embrace this interpretation because it places significantly fewer obligations on states that receive refugees. By contrast, if the provisions in the Protocol were interpreted as a positive right, it would be a right to resources to restore the refugee's physical and mental well-being to the point where they could exercise the powers of citizenship.

RISE proposes an answer to this ethical quandary. The philosophy that drives the project is that hospitality goes beyond merely securing the life of those that flee persecution. The right to asylum is both a negative right, claim against bodily harm, and a positive right as well, access to meaningful membership in a community. How can the stateless enact claims to these fundamental rights if they lack a forum which gives power to those claims? Without membership in a political community, refugees can only appeal to the good nature of philanthropists or rely

on the shifting commitment and resources of NGOs, but they can never voice those claims as a matter of rights.

The R.I.S.E. program gives its clients a platform not only to acquire the English skills they will need to integrate into U.S. society successfully, but it also gives voice to their right of social inclusion. At the same time, the program provides native New Haven residents, those who make up our volunteer and donor base, the opportunity to fulfill their duties as good citizens by welcoming their new neighbors and helping them to acclimate to their new homes. The program is mostly an extension of the public-private partnership that brought refugees to New Haven, exemplifying how civil society can fill gaps in policy with minimal financial input.