

Moving into the Fastlane

**Understanding Refugee Upward Mobility
in the Context of Resettlement**

Faith Nibbs

OPPORTUNITY

The image features a dark asphalt road that starts wide at the bottom, narrows into a thin vertical line, and then widens again into a large, upward-pointing arrow. The road is set against a background of a bright, hazy sky and rolling green hills. The word 'OPPORTUNITY' is written in large, white, 3D-style letters across the bottom of the road.

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Understanding refugee upward mobility in the context of resettlement

Faith Nibbs, PhD

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**The Forced Migration
Upward Mobility
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This document reports on a project began by Principal Investigator, Dr. Nibbs, under the name of the Forced Migration Innovation Project at Southern Methodist University, and finished under The Forced Migration Upward Mobility Project (FMUMP), where she currently serves as Director. Data was collected and analyzed in both locations and was largely funded by Hunter and Stephanie Hunt. Some of the data that contributed to this report was gathered with the assistance of research assistants, however, the analysis of the data and the final report are exclusively the work of the author.

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In a conversation with a successful business couple who had entered the country 30 years ago as refugees, I asked how they had career-laddered, or moved up over time, from their initial survival-wage job. They responded:

"It was like we were traveling on a highway, and our first job had us driving in the slow lane of life. At some point along our journey we noticed all the other cars were zooming past us at a much faster speed, but we didn't know how to get from our lane into theirs. Eventually we learned and were able to move into the Fastlane."

What exactly had they learned that prompted them to move over and up? How long did it take? What were the strategies and structural supports used to make that move? And what about those refugees who remained in the slow lane? What were the road blocks that stood in their way and how can they be avoided in the future? These are the foundational questions that guided the study and its findings presented in this report.

These findings come at a time when countries are facing unprecedented challenges in refugee integration. Although immigrant labor was expected to be a critical driver of the labor force when the first wave of baby boomers started to retire in 2008, that potential has not yet been actualized. In 2014, a number of leading organizations informing the White House Task Force on New Americans put forth issues and actions to unleash the entrepreneurial energy of refugees and maximize their ability to contribute to economic growth.* Admittedly, little input in these measures came from refugees.

This report focuses on our two and a half year exploration into these questions from a bottom-up, or refugee-centric, perspective, and designed to close the loop, or complement, the work of more top down research. The objective is to strengthen and improve economic integration by understanding how refugees have moved into the Fastlane, and how their skills, aspirations, and cultural ladders can be supported in the process of becoming full participants in their new communities.

While there was no single career-laddering strategy that worked for all refugees, the most effective strategies had a number of common features. These include:

Tuition Supported Living-Wage Skill Training:

- This was indisputably the fastest way to living-wages. Participants who engaged in these programs jumped to living-wages within an average of 13 months after program completion.

Industry Specific ESL–To–Vocation Classes:

- Many living-wage jobs require less conversational English and more vocational-specific language. Classes that helped refugees learn the language of their trade while simultaneously building trade skills, sped up movement on the path to living-wages by an average of 6 years over those who took traditional ESL classes alone.

Career Trajectory Guidance:

- Clear advice, guidance, and support about what a living-wage is, which jobs paid these wages, and what specific steps it took to get there.

Strategic Initial Job Placements:

- An initial job placement where the refugee can capitalize on their previously acquired skills and where there is distinct path to living-wages.

On The Job Training

- A job of any status with a company that offers OJT or training opportunities for advancement into living-wages.

Our data suggests that without additional support including intensive and intentional ESL, affordable housing, skill training, or opportunities to capitalize on preexisting skills, it can take 13-15 years to reach living-wages. Moreover, these refugees often have to supplement their income with long periods of government financial support or engage in negative and potentially dangerous strategies in order to get by. In particular, the report identifies the following road blocks to a sustainable livelihood:

- 1) Limited English and a lack of recognizable education or skill credentials critical to advancement in the labor market. These two barriers are extremely difficult to surmount under the current system of rapid employment into minimum wages.

1* "Strengthening the Community by Welcoming All Residents." The White House Task Force on New Americans. April 2015.

- 2) Refugees generally do not have, nor are given, a clear understanding of what are considered “skills”, the difference between a job and a career in America, what kinds of jobs pay living-wages, and the steps it will take to career-ladder into them.
- 3) Those tasked with helping refugees find initial work upon arrival are inadequately prepared to filter them into living-wage career-trajectories.
- 4) Employers who pay living-wages were the least likely to be aware of this potential workforce and not understand how a refugee’s skills and talents could be a source to meet future economic growth goals.
- 5) There are very few vocational training programs available that combine language services with living-wage job skills training. This prevents limited language speaker’s access to needed on-ramps to living-wages.
- 6) Lack of short-term bridge programs that give those with previously acquired living-wage skills, such as dairy farmers, draftsmen, construction workers, and entrepreneurs, the advanced technical and regulatory knowledge necessary to perform that job at industry standards in America.

These issues are due in part to the deeply held assumption that if we get a refugee as quickly as possible into any job, it will lead to a sustainable livelihood.

The data in this report challenge that very powerful assumption. In studying refugees’ career-laddering strategies over time, and the dramatic economic gain to both the refugee and the economy, this report identifies nine specific priorities for facilitating upward mobility earlier on in the resettlement process. These include:

Priority 1

Integrate living-wage training programs with vocation-specific language and literacy services and create clear pathways for refugees to take advantage of them upon arrival

Priority 2

Strengthen the employer connection between newcomer populations and living-wage industry shortages

Priority 3

Create programs that more uniformly aid service providers in understanding the capacities and skill sets of refugees and how they can be transitioned into living-wage career trajectories

Priority 4

Create career-laddering seminars for refugees one year post-arrival, where they can be introduced to the variety of living-wage opportunities in the US, the steps needed to move into them, and the resources available to help get them there.

Priority 5

Strengthen and facilitate better information channels about living-wage opportunities to new arrivals. Early employers of refugees should present them with a clear picture of career-laddering opportunities available at that job, the concrete steps needed to reach each rung, the wages an employee can reasonably expect to make at each level, and the approximate time it takes to advance into them.

Priority 6

Strengthen and facilitate refugee organizations as intentional repositories for employment and career-laddering information. Important information often bypasses these organizations in favor of Workforce Development offices, which refugees are unlikely to visit and where they are unlikely to be culturally understood.

Priority 7

Expand existing programs, such as Section 8, to guarantee certificates to refugees as part of their benefit package. Struggling to pay rent was often cited as a barrier to participation in skill training or language programs. As refugees move into living-wages, these vouchers get passed on to other arrivals.

Priority 8

Utilize existing technologies to deliver skill and language training or employment opportunities to refugees. Smart phones are widely used by refugees but are an underutilized tool that could deliver and translate career-laddering information to newcomers.

Priority 9

Address resource gaps and approaches that facilitate paths to entrepreneurship for limited language speakers.

Without these adaptations, refugees spend an unnecessary amount of time in the slow lane wondering how to get out. More efficiently facilitating refugees’ capacities will not only speed economic integration, but could simultaneously improve organizational response, eliminate state aid dependency, foster economic growth and development, fill the long-term needs of today’s workforce, and create a more welcoming and empowering environment for newcomers.



Moving into the Fastlane

In a conversation with a successful business couple who had entered the country 30 years ago as refugees, I asked how they had career-laddered, or moved up over time, from their initial survival-wage job. They responded:

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What exactly had they learned that prompted them to move over and up? How long did it take? What were the strategies and structural supports used to make that move? And what about those refugees who remained in the slow lane? What were the road blocks that stood in their way and how can they be avoided in the future? These are the foundational questions that guided the study and its findings presented in this report, *Moving into the Fastlane*.

Background and Introduction

Over two and half million refugees have been admitted for permanent resettled in the US since 1975. The program’s primary goal has always been to help refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency in the least amount of time. The search for durable solutions, the durable solution process, and the criteria for achieving it in terms of livelihood challenges remains elusive. That is primarily because there is limited long-term data available; little is known about what works; and there are not fixed definitions between stakeholders of when a sustainable livelihood is achieved.

A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report exploring resettlement agency approaches to economic self-sufficiency* called for more research on what forced migrants have done for work beyond their initial job placements, how they career-ladder over time, and to what degree they have actually become self-sufficient or obtained sustainable livelihoods.

1 Halpern, Peggy (November 2008). Refugee Economic Self-Sufficiency: An Exploratory Study of Approaches Used in Office of Refugee Resettlement Programs. Prepared for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning

and Evaluation. Washington, DC.

Moving into the Fast Lane, a two and a half year study, was launched in response to these unanswered questions. It began as a small research project out of Southern Methodist University’s Department of Anthropology and eventually grew into its own private research and development think tank, The Forced Migration Upward Mobility Project (FMUMP).

Several conditions have changed in the way people engage the employment market that make now a relevant time to investigate sustainable livelihoods. When the formal refugee programs were created in the early 1980s, the United States was coming out of a deep recession and double digit inflation rates. Remediation programs, such as the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) were created to get the country’s unemployed and underemployed back to work.

Many incoming refugees, who, had at that time up to 36 months of federal assistance, were able to participate in these programs. Skill-training programs that typically involved less classroom and more hands-on training enabled refugees to improve their wage prospects, despite limited language and lack of education. During the Reagan administration in the 1980s, programs that emphasized investments in training suffered budget cuts, and a short term helping-hand was given to refugees rather than career-ladders. In the 1990s, the 36 months of refugee assistance which allowed newcomers the time to learn English and a trade, was drastically reduced to just eight months of cash assistance in most states, and to four months in Texas.

As disparities between the rich and poor grows in America, contemporary discussions have turned to how living-wages and sustainable livelihoods might be attained by everyone*. Ordinances have now been passed in over 140 cities throughout the US legislating that laborers earn at least a living-wage.

However, refugees typically are not resettled in these areas. The Dallas/Ft. Worth area, who has welcomed refugees since the Russian purge of Jews in 1888, have no such ordinances. Because of its strong economy, low unemployment rates, and low cost of living, Texas has

* For the purposes of this report, we define a sustainable livelihood in terms of its ability to offer someone a living-wage. That is problematic because the term living-wage is relatively new (5-10 years), with no uniform definition and lots of debates over what it means. Most economists agree that it is more than just compensation for labor, and that it addresses both the wage level and its decency to secure the basic needs to maintain a safe, decent standard of living within a community. In America, this translates to about \$3 to \$7 above the current federal minimum wage. In our research, we split the difference and use a standard, \$5.00, above America’s minimum wage as our baseline for what constitutes a “living-wage.”

become home to refugees from over 40 different countries and continues to resettle approximately 13% of the national total of arrivals a year— more than any other state. For these reasons, we found Texas an ideal place to explore the history of economic self-sufficiency and career-laddering for refugees. While we understand that locality affects outcomes, the findings printed in this report carry clear applications and implications for other states and even countries of resettlement.

In order to explore refugees’ barriers to upward-mobility and the strategies they use to overcome them, we established a project team composed of refugee research scholars, refugees, and practitioners. This research operated from the fundamental belief that refugees are active agents in their own lives, who, like anyone else, have skills, ambitions, and dreams for sustainable livelihoods, and therefore, were a key, yet often overlooked, group from which to understand the process of upward mobility. This bottom-up approach, prevalent in anthropology, has recently been used as a powerful tool to capture the perspective of affected actors in protracted refugee situations*. However, employment outcomes for resettled refugees are largely the result of a complex web of interactions with stakeholders, such as employers, state actors, NGOs, and the host community. We, therefore, employed a combination of bottom-up and top-down methodologies to delve into the enabling environments that facilitate and/or hinder sustainable livelihoods for resettled refugees.

Our research was built on four components:

We started with an extensive review of existing data and literature (both gray and academic, including

resettlement agency records) in refugee livelihoods, upward mobility, and cultural constraints. Our secondary analyses included a fresh look at public perception through a bank of approximately 350 man-on-the street interviews with host community members on their opinions of refugees and work.

The second component of the study included qualitative and quantitative data from an informed sample of individuals representing the identified four stakeholders. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with approximately 100 adult male and female refugees, half from groups that arrived before 1995* who we classify under ‘early resettlement’ – the Hmong, Vietnamese, Ethiopian, Laotian, Cuban and Cambodian—and, half arriving after 1995 who we classify as ‘recent arrivals’ – Burmese, Bhutanese, Nepalese, Somali, Congolese, Burundi, Iraqi, and recent Cubans. An additional 160 refugees were given skill assessment surveys and with whom I had shorter interviews.

These participants were asked about their job choices, skill acquisition, career trajectories, barriers, strategies, and post-settlement wage histories. This was a critical part of the study that enabled us to ask “why.” Through patterns that emerged from those answers, we were able to determine the factors that accounted for the statistics. Pre-settlement skill surveys were conducted with an additional 160 recently arrived refugees and compared to the skill surveys collected by service providers upon intake. In depth interviews were conducted with 20



* See Betts et al., *Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions*. Published by the Humanitarian Innovation Project, University of Oxford. June 2104.

* The year 1995 was chosen to coincide with policy shifts away from training to a short term helping-hand.

contracted NGO service providers, with an emphasis on those who work directly in securing refugee employment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 employers with an emphasis on those who pay, or offer a distinct pathway to living-wages. Additional insights were generated from conversations with senior staff in service provider organizations, academics, and senior staff in employment-related governmental institutions such as Health and Human Services and the Small Business Association.

A third important component of our study included over 300 hours of participant observation of employment and self-sufficiency building activities designed for refugees; of vocational institutions and programs designed to lead the underemployed [more generally] to living-wages and; of innovative programs and technologies around the country designed to support a transition to living-wages.

Having reviewed the literature and gathered qualitative and quantitative perspectives, we facilitated and observed collaborative focus groups with 14 refugees, business owners, service providers, and state actors. Each of these focus groups were designed to tackle a livelihood issues from multiple perspectives, giving equal weight to all perspectives, including the affected population.

This report synthesizes the information generated in the four components of this research and draws a picture of how refugees have fared economically over the past 30 or so

years*, the road blocks that derailed their attempts to reach living-wages, new potholes that have emerged along the way, and the strategies and structural supports refugees used to overcome them. We summarize lessons learned and then conclude with a series of recommendations. The recommendations feature innovative suggestions on how, utilizing current programming and public/private partnerships, we might facilitate the realization of refugees' skills and aspirations into more sustainable livelihoods in a shorter period of time while simultaneously improving organizational response, eliminating state aid dependency, fostering economic growth and development, and filling the long-term needs of today's workforce.

We begin with a discussion of the three fastest routes to living-wages found across all groups of refugees. We then break down particular clusters of factors that were associated with particular types of refugees — the highly skilled, the unskilled who came from urban areas, and the unskilled from rural areas. The information is laid out with a overview followed by a set of *Lane Changing* factors that enabled upward mobility, as well as *Road Blocks* that detracted from that success. In addition, each section features best practices and promising approaches through *Innovation Spotlights*, our *Key Findings*, and recommendations for better facilitation in *Driving it Home*.

* In as much as possible, wage histories were verified by tax, pay stub or retirement documents, but many participants relied on memory alone. While participants were certain of when large jumps to living-wages occurred and the circumstances surrounding them, they were unsure of exact incremental, nickel and dime wage changes along the way. Therefore we are confident in the statistical findings of the number of years it took this sample to jump to living-wages and the variables related to those cases, however this study cannot be used as a reliable measure of the incremental wage changes in between arrival and living-wages. Our model included a participants post-arrival wage history, the year training began, and the year training was completed, correlated against each years approximate living-wage, cost of social services qualified for by a family of four at each income level, and approximate tax revenue generated from a family of four at each income interval. These charts represent the results of the factor analysis as regression-adjusted means.



“I would have liked to have had more guidance on skills and career planning. Tell me all the possibilities in America. Give me choices. Help me get from here to there. Help me before I get stuck!”

(Burmese Refugee)

“I didn’t know where to go to find a better paying job. I didn’t know what jobs pay better. I didn’t know where to go to get that information. I had to find it out from a friend years later. This information needs to be more available.”

(Cambodian Refugee)







Living-Wage Skill Training

For the purposes of this study, living-wage skill training is defined as any program that enables participants to obtain the job skills, certifications, training, and tools needed to move directly into jobs paying living-wages, with benefits and distinct career-laddering possibilities. This study showed a persistent difference in the economic outcomes and a general satisfaction of livelihood in refugees who participated in some sort of living-wage skill training after arrival in the US. Our research indicates that those who took part in skill programs were able to earn a living-wage in an average of 13 months of program completion (Figure 1). Moreover, we found that living-wage skill training made those participants somewhat recession proof. When, for example, a manufacturing plant closed or moved overseas, those who had these upgraded skills were able to find another job in their trade in a relatively short amount of time at or above the living-wage level they had built. Some refugees who trained in a particular career field ended up taking jobs in other vocations. These participants, however, still made the jump to living wages within 13 months of their initial program completion. Living-wage skill training was, bar none, the fastest path to living wages across all groups of refugees.



Average Years to Earn A Living Wage

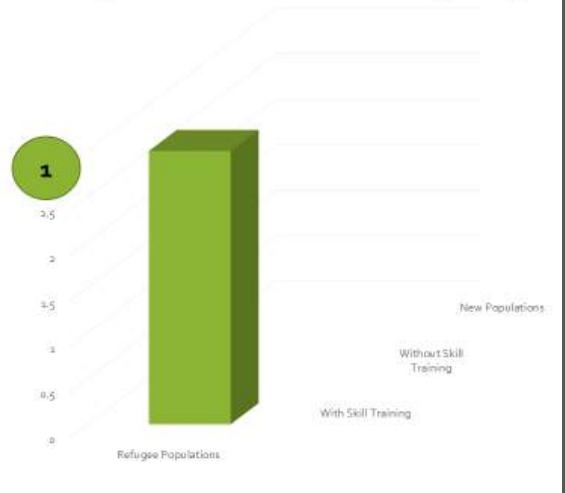


Figure 1



Lane Changers

- The 36 months of governmental support given to early arrivals enabled them time to acquire, through full-time ESL programs, a sufficient English to qualify for vocational programs.
- The 36 months of governmental support given to early arrivals enabled them financial security to enroll in these programs full-time while still providing basic support for their families.
- Early workforce development programs such as CETA, and later, the Job Training Partnership Act, provided tuition assistance and scholarships that made enrolling in living-wage skill training programs affordable for refugees.
- Clear advice, guidance, and support from a knowledgeable person in the host community informed refugees on the availability of, process of enrolment, tuition assistance plans, and long term benefits of skill training classes.
- Child care was more affordable, in fact, everything was. The lower cost of living allowed most women from intact families to stay home with small children, or work “mother’s hours” during the school day so that one member of the household could enroll in these programs.

One example is a refugee who entered a course for aviation mechanics. He completed the course just as major airlines were consolidating and mechanics laid off. As occupational demand was diminishing, he segued those skills into a position repairing heavy machinery for another industry at approximately the same pay.

While the outcome was, without question, the same for everyone who engaged in some sort of formalized living-wage skill training – a jump to living wages within an average of 13 months of program completion – those who waited to get training for any of the reasons listed under our *Road Blocks* section spent unnecessary years working below living wages supplementing income with government assistance. Figure 2 gives an example of the wages earned by eight participants, all of whom received living-wage skill training.* The dark green represents the number of years since arrival a participant worked at minimal, survival wages. The medium green color represents the number of years a participant spent in skill training, and the light green represents the number of years a participant has worked at living wages. The chart suggests a direct correlation between skill training and years at living wages.

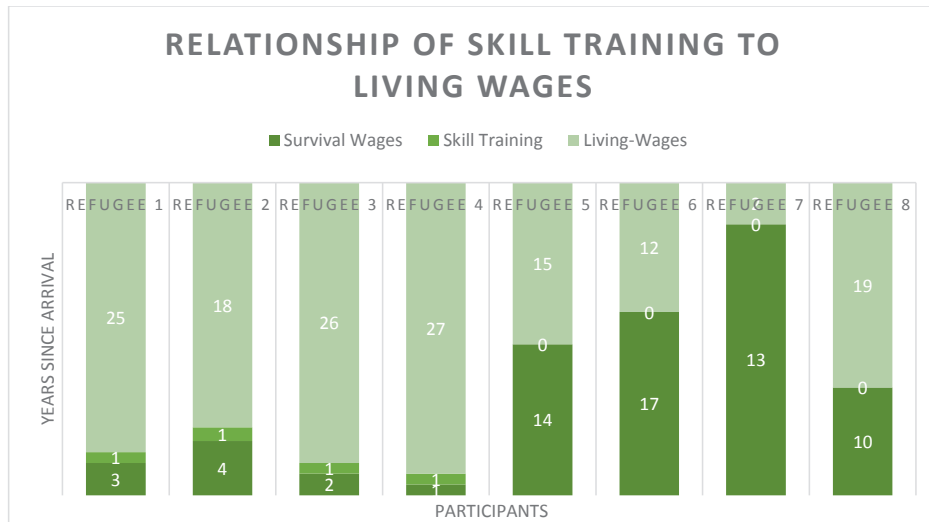


Figure 2



There is a market difference in both male and female refugee's ability to career-ladder into living wages for those who engaged living-wage skill training than those of their untrained peers.



There is a persistent difference in employment outcomes for refugees who began training quickly and those who delayed entry into training.

Average Years to Earn A Living Wage



Figure 3

* These figures are from eight actual participants and are illustrative of the greater pattern of results found among all participants who participated in skill training.



Road Blocks

The disabling factors associated with delayed entry into training programs were:

- No knowledge of these programs, how to get into them, or pay for them until years after arrival
- Didn't know the minimum wage job they were given wouldn't lead to living wages. Didn't realize they needed a different path to living wages until years after arrival
- Didn't know what jobs paid a living wage, or what it took to get into them until years later
- Couldn't afford full-time school and were unaware of tuition assistance programs, waited years to save the money
- Could not juggle full-time work and school with the erratic and demanding schedules associated with many minimum-wage jobs
- Did not have the time to take full-time ESL while working a full-time job, thereby, taking up to 8 years to acquire a sufficient enough level of English to gain entry into the programs
- Some programs required education credentials that the refugee either didn't have, or couldn't prove. Acquiring these credentials while working a full-time job often took years.
- Single mothers, as the only breadwinners in the family, could not afford the demands of full-time work, full-time school, study, and full-time motherhood at the same time. These women typically waited until their children were in school, or married someone who was willing to delay childrearing until after trade school.



There is a big difference in employment outcomes for refugees who are unable to participate in skill training. It took these participants an average of 14 years post-arrival to reach a living-wage (see Figure 3). Moreover when these workers were displaced because of plant closures, they took longer to find another job than their skill-trained cohort, and because they were still without skills, often had to start over again at minimum wage.



In terms of tax revenue generated, and savings to social service support over time, we estimate that those who engaged in early living wage skill training generated \$4437.00 in annual federal and Social Security tax revenue for every year since skill training, and saved the government an estimated \$13,019.40 per year in social service support.* Based on the reported average government investment in skill training per enrollee at that time (\$2,400), that's an estimated tax return on investment of 627%. **

* Because there are so many categories of welfare recipients and so many different types of benefits, it is extremely difficult to determine how many people get what combination of benefits. This figure is based on the average family size in our sample (5 people), multiplied by the sum of the three qualified social benefits programs eligible by all participants with income under the poverty line in Texas during 1985 (WIC, Food Stamps, and Children's Medicaid). Likewise, tax revenue is estimated based on the rate paid by living-wages in 1985 (\$18,000) at 17% federal and 7.65 social security taxes by a family of five, and not actual taxes paid by participants.

** While it is not possible to know the exact cost of the different skill training programs engaged by the refugees in our sample, we base our return on the average cost, per participant, as calculated by the Department of Labor (Bloom, Howard S., and Maureen A. McLaughlin. "CETA Training Programs: Do They Work for Adults?", 1982)



Road Blocks

The disabling factors associated with never attending living-wage skill training:

- Being ushered straight into minimum wage jobs that didn't teach any particular skill nor have any distinct career-laddering opportunities
- Worked in job environments where English wasn't spoken and couldn't get enough English to qualify for programs
- Didn't know the minimum-wage job they were given wouldn't lead to living-wages. Didn't realize they needed a different path to living-wages until years after arrival, and then couldn't afford to leave the job for school
- Didn't know what jobs paid a living-wage, or what kind of training or certification was required to career-ladder
- Couldn't afford full-time school and were unaware of tuition assistance programs
- Couldn't juggle full-time work and school with the erratic and demanding schedules associated with many minimum-wage jobs
- Didn't have time to take full-time ESL while working a full-time job with erratic hours, and sometimes an additional part-time job, never acquiring the literacy skills needed for conventional vocational programs
- ESL programs contain little living-wage vocation-related content, thus leaving those who complete all four levels of ESL with a language gap to enter vocational programs
- Some programs required education credentials that the refugee either didn't have, or couldn't prove. Acquiring these credentials while working a full-time job and having other family and/or cultural obligations was insurmountable.



Innovation Spotlight

Open Arms is a sewing shop in Austin, TX that has a larger social impact mission. Founded in 2010, Open Arms is part of the non-profit wing of the Multicultural Refugee Coalition (MRC) that provides sewing training to refugee women. Their mission was created in response to one of the greatest needs in the refugee community: living-wage work that allowed local refugee women, who didn't have as many work opportunities because they lacked necessary knowledge of English or job skills, a wage rate that met standards of living. They started by using recycled t-shirts to make a line of skirts and scarves, now their wares are sold across the US at major retailers such as Whole Foods and Ikea. The assistant manager, Christine, is a refugee from Burundi who was trained at MRC and has since worked her way up to a management role.



"I had this friend that told me about this school that taught both English and gets you a license to work in HVAC at the same time. The jobs pay \$14 to \$25 an hour when you get your license. And the school has the connections to get you a job when you graduate. With that money someone can live - not just worry every day about surviving. I go to that school, and have a hope for the future."

(Cuban Parolee)



Early investment in living-wage skill acquisition for refugees provides the fastest path to a sustainable livelihood and is the least costly option for federal and state resources over the long run. Those outcomes increase exponentially the earlier the training is engaged.



Previous studies on the impact of such training programs on the general unemployed or underemployed population did not find such programs to affect the average future earnings of male participants. Our study suggests that when refugee men are looked at separately, there is a strong correlation between participation in these programs and future earnings.



Intentional First Job Placement

There is a persistent difference in the economic outcomes and general livelihood satisfaction among refugees whose initial job placement was related to, and more importantly, allowed them to capitalize on, previously acquired skills.*

Even with work experience in industries considered relatively low paying, such as in farming, fishing, sewing, or herding, refugees said they were able to find satisfaction in the familiarity of a job they knew when everything else around them was so new. This familiarity seemed to give newcomers a relative advantage in getting ahead because they were already familiar with the myriad positions within the industry that paid more, and, already possessing the skills, were able to concentrate on learning the relevant language, and bridging the technological skills gap to help them move up into those higher paying positions faster than those that had to start over in an unfamiliar or an unrelated industry.

This was also the case for those who weren't placed in previous skill relevant jobs, but at some point transitioned to a related field. Their path to living-wages accelerated.



Lane Changers

- A knowledgeable case worker who knew how to transition refugees' previous skills into work force opportunities
- A well-connected case worker whose breadth of employment connections provided viable and relevant employment options for the refugee
- Trusted connections with a knowledgeable person in the host community, such as a sponsor or sympathetic co-worker, who could guide and support the refugee's job search toward something that capitalized on their previous skills
- The 36 months of governmental support enabled employment service case workers and refugees time to find more appropriate placements



Innovation Spotlight

One refugee grew up working in her mother's coffee shop. After moving to a Thai refugee camp, she used her existing skills and entrepreneurial ambition to open a coffee shop in the refugee camp. After resettlement in the US, she was placed in a factory doing tedious assembly work, while longing to open a business based on her previous skills that would cater to her ethnic community. Her boss, upon hearing her story, walked her and her husband through the regulatory steps of opening a business. The couple now enjoy a successful sustainable career in the food industry, have regained a sense of prestige in the community, and as owners of their own business are happy "doing what we love and being able to control our own path."



* We define a job where a refugee can capitalize on previous skills to mean a job that offers distinct career-laddering opportunities within that specific job or industry using that skill.



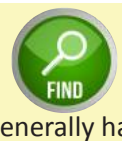
Road Blocks

The disabling factors associated with helping refugees into a first job with distinct career-laddering opportunities:

- Some case workers are more effective in teasing out skills from past experiences. The current system of skill intake is subjective and relies heavily on the intake skills of the person asking the questions. As a result, there is a lot of inconsistency in recognizing and knowing what to do with nonconventional pre-flight experiences.
 - Many refugees come from backgrounds where the English word “skill” is hard to translate or define, leaving them to think they have none. Some thought it meant only something they had been paid to do, others thought it was a special talent, and still others thought “skill” meant something they would be successful at in the United States. These misunderstandings kept many refugees from telling caseworkers about useful experiences that might have led to more gainful employment opportunities.
 - Resettlement placement doesn’t take previously held skills into consideration. For example, one refugee with a background in aviation mechanics was resettled 200 miles away from the nearest airport. After struggling for two years in an unrelated minimum wage job, he relocated himself to a city near a major airline. Six months later he was back in avionics earning above living-wage.
 - Match grant programs that promise an extended month or two of cash payments in exchange for accepting the first job offered encourage refugees to take ill-placed “survival jobs” in unrelated fields with little or no possibility for advancement. While this solves the “problem” of helping refugees find work, it falls short of aiding them in long-term self-sufficiency.
 - Resettlement case workers’ employment contacts are mostly in survival jobs that employ large numbers of unskilled workers with few possibilities to move into living-wages. This gives refugees few options to transition previous skills into meaningful employment.
- Service providers didn’t feel they had enough time to find meaningful job matches for their clients, even if they wanted to.
 - Government contracts reward service providers for numbers of people employed in a short amount of time, and lack incentives to match them to more appropriate jobs that capitalize on previous skills or offer distinct career-laddering opportunities. Such incentives would benefit the refugee and local economy, while lessening aid dependency in the long run.
 - It took a refugee an average of five years to figure out that the job they were first placed in was not sustainable.* When they finally realized this, they were out of the system and had not amassed enough social capital in the host community to get help finding a more appropriate placement.



An initial job placement that is related to, and allows refugees to capitalize on, previously acquired skills, significantly speeds their way on the path to living-wages, lessens their long-term economic dependency on social services, and speeds integration into the workforce.



Refugee employment program personnel generally have insufficient time, incentives, living-wage employer contacts, training, or understanding of the cultural complexities of refugee ‘skills’ to help new arrivals find jobs where they can sufficiently capitalize on previously acquired skills.

“After a year, because the company was growing so fast, the [owner] said, why don’t you guys train Danny and put him in the lab? I said sure. I didn’t even have a chemistry background and they just put me in the lab. It was working well and they were paying me good money. After that I started bringing refugees to the company. The Human Resources contacted me first thing when there were any openings. When I left, there were 45 Ethiopians working for that company. Now I have heard there are over 100.”

(Ethiopian Refugee)



On the Job Training

These programs connect refugees who cannot attend vocational training to a living-wage career pathway by enabling them to learn a skillset directly through hands-on training with an employer. While this kind of employment intervention isn't new, refugees who used this on-ramp appreciated the ability to learn career-building skills while holding down a full-time job. While many stayed with those companies, even those who didn't attributed the valuable training they received as the enabling factor to move into management, start their own businesses, or into living-wages somewhere else. Notably, most refugees we interviewed were initially placed in ill-suited jobs with no real possibility of advancement, and noted finding their OJT opportunity through their own personal networks. The following set of factors were noted by these refugees as enabling their participation in these programs:



Lane Changers

- Strong refugee networks or associations to connect kin to career-laddering opportunities
- Employers willing to engage newcomers in their plans for expansion with opportunities for professional growth and development
- Having proficient enough English to be considered for these programs by employers



Innovation Spotlight

One African refugee worked at 7-Eleven for several years taking advantage of their management training courses and moving up the ladder to a low-level management position. Wanting to open his own business in the food industry, he used that opportunity to learn about the US regulatory system on how to own and operate a food business. When he left to start his own Injera bread company, 7-Eleven was among the first to carry his products. Today his business has grown to operate out of a 30,000 square foot facility where he makes and ships Injera all over the US.





Road Blocks

The disabling factors associated with a refugee’s lack of participation in these programs were:

- Service providers have limited knowledge of, or connections with OJT employment opportunities.
- Some refugees lack the prerequisite English to get hired, even at entry level, in OJT programs
- Some refugees have limited social networks to hear about these opportunities in the community. This is especially true for new populations.
- While many employers have begun to launch OJT programs to underrepresented groups to encourage their participation in the workforce, they aren’t aware of how to include newcomers with limited English into these opportunities.
- OJT employers were not fully aware of the work rights of refugees neither had they given much consideration to their global talent as a potential asset to their companies future economic growth.
- A lack of incentive to bridge this gap



Employer-sponsored, intermediaries to OJT opportunities for limited language speakers could be a powerful tool to move refugees into living-wages. However, connecting newcomers to these on-ramps in greater numbers will require more recognition of how broadening these opportunities to refugee populations can help employers fill projected skill gaps, and more expansive relationships between service providers and these industries.



Driving it Home

Service providers

- Identify employers who offer OJT into living-wages and what it takes to get refugees into them. These opportunities are traditionally advertised in High Schools and at Workforce Development Offices. Service providers need to become an equal repository for this information.

Employers

- Offer more complete on-ramps to OJT opportunities for English Language Learners, like combining industry-specific adult ESL and literacy classes with hands-on training, internships, and direct mentoring.

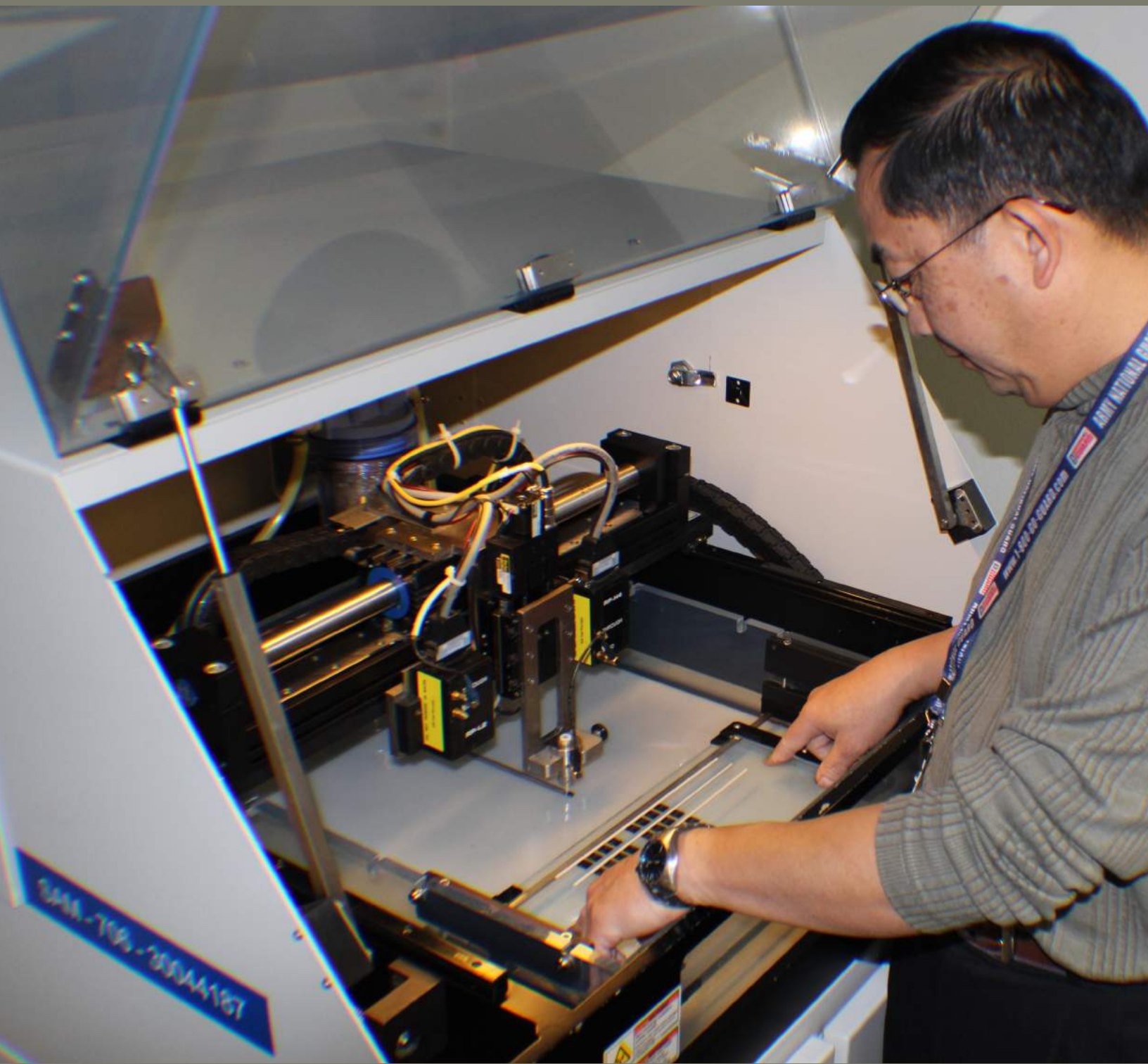
Policy Makers

- The government could offer state and federal incentives for companies to enhance or expand existing models of OJT to intentionally include refugees. This would bring broader awareness of this population to employers, a better understanding of their work rights, and include them in conversations about filling America’s skills gaps.

While all these training programs provide the fastest routes to living wages for refugees, the challenges to career-laddering were further complicated by factors clustered around three particular characteristics of pre-arrival: being highly skilled, being from an urban environment, and being from a rural environments. In this next section we look more closely at the findings from these classificatory groups.

Intentions meant to integrate skilled refugees into the workforce are one thing, to operationalize these intentions effectively is quite another.

(Service Provider)



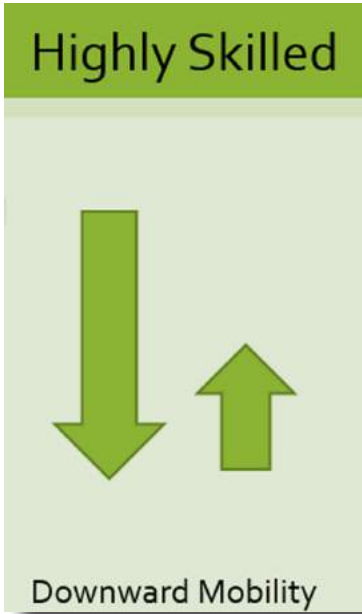


The Highly Skilled



Definitions of the highly skilled traditionally refer to a refugee who is college-educated. We extend that definition, for the purposes of this research, to those who arrive in the US proficient in a vocational skill that would pay a living-wage. These individuals were typically health service professionals, engineers, scientists, teachers, aircraft mechanics, plumbers, photographers, military personnel, heavy equipment operators, and small business owners in their home country.

- This highly skilled group was the most likely to experience downward mobility upon entering the US. Despite their experiences, barriers to entering the US workforce in their professional fields prompted them to accept what has been called “survival jobs” as cashiers, nannies, cleaning staff, or grocery clerks. These jobs paid minimal wages, lacked distinct career-laddering possibilities, and had no connection to their previous skills. It is estimated that there are more than 1.8 million of these skilled immigrants in the United States who are unemployed or underemployed.*
- This group was the most aware that they were put in non-sustainable jobs, and the most aware of the barriers to reentering their professional fields.
- This group was the most likely to suffer depression in relation to a negative change in status from their previous livelihood.
- This group arrived with skills highly sought after by employers in the American workforce, yet those employers were the least aware that these skills existed among resettled refugees.
- This group was the most likely to take advantage of the 36 month resettlement support offered in the 1980’s to learn English, get an American education, re-credentialing, or seek additional skill certification. Many of the refugees fitting this description ended up with a degree or certification in a different field than their previous work, citing the difficulties and expenses of starting their profession over from scratch (e.g. it would take a Physician’s Assistant six years of competitive schooling, where as someone could get an RN certification at a community college in just 36 months).
- This group was the most likely to arrive with an understanding that higher education was the “best” path to living-wages.
- This group was the most likely to arrive with some English.
- This group was the most vocal about the lack of guidance they were given to rebuild their professional careers or help in finding a job where they could capitalize on their previous skills. Most say they were encouraged by sponsors and service providers to take “any old job” for survival reasons, then left alone to figure out how to move into the Fastlane. Being unaware of the structures and resources in America put many on a frustrating path from which it would take years to recover. They lament the wasted time and lost wages, the tax dollars that could have been reinvested in the American economy, and the loss for employers looking to recruit and retain internationally-trained talent. Refugees said they would have liked more customized guidance and opportunities for professional networking with those who needed their skills.



* Upwardly Global



Lane Changers

Refugee Agency

- Some refused to take the survival jobs offered them, insisting to their case workers that they wanted to work in a job that allowed them to also attend college. Even though it took these refugees an average of 4.5 years to complete a technical education, they jumped to living-wages within a year after college completion.

Secondary Migration

- Some refugees self-selected to move to other parts of the US where there were opportunities to reengage their profession that didn't exist in the area they were originally placed. Most refugees who employed this strategy said it took them an average of five years to figure out where to go to make this adjustment, and cost them unnecessary money to move and start again. However, after they made the move, they were able to jump to living-wages within a year of relocation.

Extended Support Time

- Some refugees used the 36 months of resettlement support as a strategy to engage English lessons on a full-time basis. Those who did, were able to gain English proficiency needed to enter community college. While these refugees usually received a certification or Associate Degree in a position of lesser status than the one held in their country, they were able to make the jump to living-wages within a year of completing their new certification.

Part-Time Work

- For some refugees who arrived with intact families, the non-skilled adult in the household worked a full-time job, while the skilled worker took a part-time job, allowing them the needed time to learn English and study for recertification. Those who employed this strategy took an average of 4.5 years to complete recertification, but jumped to living-wages within a year after its completion. This strategy was not available for the many who arrived as single mothers, or who were resettled in areas where it took two, full-time, survival job incomes just to meet basic expenses.

Social Capital in the Host Community

- Many refugees attributed someone in the host community, who was doing a similar job to what they had worked in their homeland, with helping them understand the steps needed to get back into their profession. The refugees who used this strategy said it took time to build those relationships, thus, such a move didn't usually occur until 1-2 years after arrival. However, those refugees were able to jump to living-wages within a year of completing the steps recommended by their host contact.

Part-Time School

- Going to college while working a full-time, minimum wage job. This seemed to be the most difficult and frustrating strategy recalled by refugees, and as such, the one most often abandoned. Taking courses piecemeal takes 7-9 years to complete a degree. Even those with the best of intentions had other unexpected financial and social obligations creep up during those years that forced them to drop out. Those who managed to stick it out jumped to living-wages within a year of completion.

Workplace Language Integration

- Some refugees reported using their survival jobs as a strategic place to learn English. This occurred most often at jobs that were both highly communicative and where most of the other workers were native English speakers. Once the refugee could speak better English, they were able to move into jobs related to their skilled profession.

Skilled Refugee Job Seeker Training Programs

- Some refugees sought help from organizations with a range of resources to support skilled refugees to restart their career. Refugees who strategically used these resources were able to jump to living-wages within a year of organization contact. Programs such as Upwardly Global, REACH, and IMPRINT are good at connecting skilled immigrants to partner companies, but their organizations don't have a presence in many areas with high concentrations of refugees.



Road Blocks

- Certifications that didn't transfer or credentials that weren't recognized by the US
- Arrived without proof of education or certification and the situation in previous country made it impossible to reclaim them
- Lacked the language skills to pass recertification tests
- Financial outlay for recertification or credential recognition was extremely prohibitive
- Lack of knowledge of the system, and no knowledge of where to go for continued help in career-laddering (how do I get from here to there in America?). The idea of walking into a Workforce Development office or visiting a community college career counselor was a foreign concept to newcomers. Most were unaware of these services, and there was little outreach by these agencies to those in refugee communities.
- The survival job they accepted upon arrival took them away from ESL and other courses of action needed to move back into their profession.
- As unnecessary years passed working a survival job, refugees lost the sharpness they had to be competitive in their industry, lessening the opportunity for them to ever professionally reengage them.
- Employment counselors/service providers didn't have the network of professional partnerships to help them find appropriate matches to their skills.
- Employers were generally unaware that refugees came with their own skills and how those skills could benefit their economic growth. They overwhelmingly thought them to be uneducated, most suited for the minimum-wage jobs other people didn't want, and in need of a hand out. This kind of thinking has been linked to mass exploitation and brain waste.*
- A lack of psychosocial support for those experiencing downward mobility



Innovation Spotlight

Mac came to the United States with a good command of the English language and an interrupted college education. Upon arrival, the service providers brought him to work at a grocery store. When he saw how disconnected it was from his skill set and ambitions he asked for help continuing his education. Without the proper documentation, Mac had to take a GED test and then was admitted to college. With a Pell Grant and his wife working a survival job, he continued his education. After graduation he started working in franchise management at living-wages. He now owns 22 restaurants. "For any refugee who is coming to this country going straight into to a job that doesn't get you anywhere, that's not advisable. We have to take the opportunity here in this county to be able to go to school"



* "State-Level Initiatives to Address Brain Waste Among Highly Educated Immigrants and Refugees: Special Focus on Nurses, Engineers, and Teachers." Migration Policy Institute. Webinar. 5.14.2014.



Driving it Home

Service Providers

- Employment specialists need to extend their expertise to facilitate the talent pool of highly skilled refugees. Currently, these providers operate as a clearing house for minimum-wage jobs, filtering the highly skilled into low-wage, dead-end employment, leaving them without career-ladders to rebuild their professional careers. It isn't enough that groups like Upwardly Global, or IMPACT, while effective, reach out to pockets of skilled refugees around the country. There needs to be someone doing that job with the same effectiveness in every resettlement office, so that every skilled refugee has an opportunity to reengage their profession at a meaningful level.

Policy Makers

- Since helping skilled refugees re-enter the work force at living-wages adds to America's tax base, alleviates poverty and entitlement spending, and eliminates brain waste, we urge policy makers to broaden recognition of foreign credentials, invest in cost-sharing programs for re-credentialing, and offer service-provider incentives to facilitate professional connections.

Community Organizations

- Create meaningful opportunities for newcomers to network and make connections with host community members from multiple professions. Sponsor career fairs of sorts, where refugees can talk to people from different professions (different from a job fair because jobs aren't offered, just information on paths to professional employment from insiders).

Development

- There is a need to develop easily accessible career-laddering information and to make it available in the places and on the technological platforms that refugees would most logically frequent. Refugees workshopping this idea said that having such tools would have significantly shortened their transition to living-wages. Refugees should be made aware of these resources before exiting the resettlement system so they have this information at their fingertips well beyond their days with a service provider.



While these barriers proved often unnecessary challenges, the majority of skilled refugees found ways to overcome them and eventually move into living-wages. This report finds that the length of time on aid dependency and the path to living-wages could be shortened for skilled refugees by facilitating the strategies that have worked for them.



Employment service providers working in the refugee industry need greater tools, training, and time to provide adequate guidance and connections for professional refugees.



When I got resettled in the United States I was so excited that I was going to continue practicing as a Physician's Assistant. I was informed that my license couldnot transfer to the United States with me, but I never believed it. When I got here and learned it was true, it was very disappointing and depressing. I had to start over again as a nurses aid. It's now taken me 10 years to get my RN license, and Its still not up to the job I had before.

(Burundi Refugee)



Low-Skilled Urban Refugees

While we acknowledge that many people living in urban areas are skilled, for the purposes of this research, low-skilled urban refugees are considered to be those who came to the US from urban backgrounds, but do not have the credentials of highly skilled refugees. More than half the refugees UNHCR serves now live in urban areas. This group presented certain patterns in the experiences and paths to living-wages that merited a distinction. Firstly, urban refugees lived in areas where they had exposure to the idea of higher education and to a broader variety of jobs. While not necessarily having access to these jobs or education, their exposure to these created a marked advantage when looking for career-laddering opportunities in the US. For example, they didn't need much convincing that better opportunities were out there than what was given them in their first survival jobs. Moreover, in a resettlement context that they perceived as having vastly more opportunity than where they had come from, they eagerly pursued them through a variety of innovative strategies. Refugees in this group were the most likely to arrive with only a primary education, unlikely to arrive with any English language proficiency, yet the most likely to experience relative upward mobility over time from their pre-flight professions.



Innovation Spotlight

Sam is a Cuban refugee from the city of Havana. Even though he has no more than a high school education, his fascination with electronics has had him tinkering in fixing things since he was a youth. After coming to the US, he dreamt of becoming an apartment maintenance manager, but his lack of English forced him to settle on a minimum-wage dishwashing job, making it difficult for him to even pay his rent. Several years after arrival a friend told him about the Austin Career Institute, a heating and air conditioning program for newcomers that combines industry-specific language acquisition with trade learning and certification. Workforce investment paid for his course and within a year he had a job that paid \$18.00 an hour with benefits. "This program gave me life again."



Lane Changers

Extended Resettlement Safety Net

- Many refugees in this category used the early 36 month resettlement safety net to learn English, then took advantage of the government paid skill training vocational programs available to the unemployed. Such economy stimulating programs as CITA, Job Corps and WIA, were cited by refugees as giving them the hand up they needed to learn a living-wage trade.

On the Job Training

- Refugees who couldn't qualify for those programs sought out jobs themselves that offered free on-the-job management training, such as at 7-Eleven, that they used to segue into more lucrative career, and apprenticeships. Similar programs are available today at Chipotle, but few offer on-ramps for English Language Learners.

Small Business Ownership

- Many refugees opted for quick certification programs where they could pool money with relatives to open their own business (Nail/beauty salon technician, insurance broker, CDL truck driver, taxi cab owner). While most agreed that after paying their business expenses they probably didn't make that "much" money*, they cited the flexibility of setting their own schedule, and controlling their own destiny as empowering forces they equated with upward mobility.

* Small business owners had a hard time quantifying their actual wages, but admitted that they did not consider themselves to "wealthy", but that they had sufficient money to live "comfortably" while controlling their own schedule.



Road Blocks

- Meeting English language proficiency levels to qualify for technical education programs while also working a full time job took an average of 8 -10 years for non-highly skilled, urban refugees. Moreover, the survival jobs many refugees were placed in didn't have a lot of opportunity for interaction (e.g. factory line work) or employed large numbers of other non-English speakers, leaving them little opportunity to accelerate the English learning process.
- Some refugees did not have enough education in their host country or in asylum to pass the required GED prerequisite to enter the training programs that could have propelled them into living-wages.
- Those who arrived as single mothers, elderly, or heads of large households had to work survival jobs, sometimes two at a time, in order to meet monthly expenses, therefore excluding them from other known career-building but time consuming opportunities such as ESL, GED, or technical college programs.
- Some refugees fell prey to well-meaning but misguided employment training programs that prepared them for quick entry into service sector jobs that paid minimal wages with no distinct path forward (e.g. hotel workers, kitchen help).



Programs that combine language and literacy services with living-wage job skills training for new arrivals might provide the shortest path to living-wages. This idea is not new and was raised in a policy brief as early as 2003. Thirteen years later, we still find very few programs that would fit this description. *

Center for Law and Social Policy, The Language of Opportunity: Expanding Employment Prospects for Adults with Limited English Skills, August 2003, Series No. 2.



Driving it Home

Service Providers

- We often heard service providers reiterate their mission as getting refugees resettled, not necessarily setting them on a career path. That structural flaw in the goals of resettlement need to change. This research has suggested that failing to do the latter has had long-term consequences on their clients as well as the local economy.

Policy Makers

- Create more incentives for the development of Vocational programs where limited language speakers can learn English concurrently with vocational skills, not after, and make WIOA rules especially favorable to these kinds of programing. A recent report by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) suggests a poor record of connecting individuals who are low-educated and/or with limited English to these models of career pathways. * More investment is needed in ESL-to living-wage vocation training programs to provide equitable access to career-laddering.

Employers

- Think about adjusting rigid standards for foreign trained individuals with limited language and less traditional education. Revising some requirements can open up a pool of globally trained talent that may have been previously overlooked.

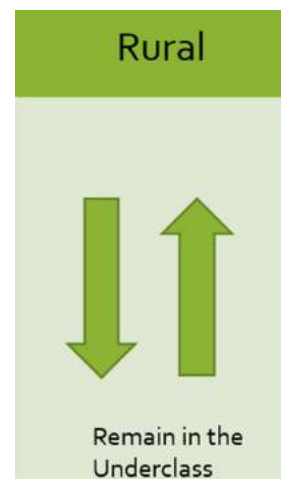
Differences in the level of English skills, formal education, and job readiness were seen between the Congolese who took asylum in urban areas and those who took asylum in refugee camps. Participants that took asylum in urban centers, such as Johannesburg, South Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, Lusaka, and Zambia, arrived in the United States with more functional English, had opportunities in the urban centers to obtain education or skills training, and had a familiarity with the basic but ubiquitous technology found in the US job market. For example, in the urban centers they had seen or used a new cash register, time clocks, or a laptop computer. This differed from those who took asylum in the refugee camps who arrived with little to no English language skills, had few opportunities for higher education, and had little to no familiarity with common technology. This seems to support both the call by some for a refugee's right to work in asylum and the call to stop refugee encampment.



Low-Skilled Rural Refugees

For the purposes of this research, low-skilled rural refugees are considered those who do not have the credentials of highly skilled refugees and came to the US from non-metropolitan areas, usually having stayed in a rural refugee camp, or organized settlements post-flight. We separate this group from those coming directly from urban backgrounds because we found patterns in their experiences and paths to living-wages that merit such a distinction. Rural refugees are often from farming communities with little exposure to higher education and limited choices in career pathways. This profoundly lengthened the learning curve about the US labor market – what jobs were sustainable, what companies offered career-laddering opportunities, and the availability of free language classes and basic education – all adding unnecessary years of stumbling around on the path to self-sufficiency. This group’s categorical slow rise to living-wages has often been attributed to their lack of skills, however, this report finds that it was equally from a lack of knowledge about how to negotiate an industrial work force. We suggest that a useful tool in facilitating upward mobility would be offering more intentional career information to rural refugees before they exit the resettlement system.

- While this didn’t apply to everyone from this background, the participants from this group were the most likely to experience a relative stagnant mobility over time – that is, while they found jobs in the US after resettlement, their inability to negotiate the US labor market, lack of perceived transferable skills, education, and language needed to enter vocational programs, held them for long periods of time in minimal wage work and relative poverty.
- After 10 years in the country, most refugees in this category perceived themselves as occupying the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder in their new country with few options to get out.
- With few other options, this group was the most likely to engage in negative means of supplementing their income.
- This group was the most vulnerable to layoffs in an economic downturn, and the most likely to start at the bottom again when they found another job.
- This group was the most likely to depend on pre-arrival forms of cultural support to make ends meet.



- This group was the most likely to have pre-arrival skills that were not recognized by service providers or employers, and the group in the most need of that recognition.
- Those in this group typically didn’t earn living-wages until 13-15 years after arrival.





Lane Changers

Traditional Lending Associations

- Many refugees brought with them systems of pooling and lending money. We found many versions of these traditional lending associations still operating among multiple ethnic groups which afforded them the income to start businesses, pay for weddings, or make major purchases to facilitate employment, such as a car.

Community Gardening

- Many low income refugees used either community plots or backyards to grow produce or raise essential livestock that afforded them a healthy diet and supplemental income from selling or bartering away excess.

Employing Kin

- Many low income refugees found employment in the care of a more successful member of their ethnic group. This enabled the refugee to learn and perform skilled work before they had acquired complete language acquisition.

Saving/Spending Retirement Money

- Some refugees also cashed in 401k's, or other similar saving funds after retirement, to start a business that capitalized on a pre-flight skill or dream while having the security of a pension.



Sometimes getting ahead meant resorting to things we consider as “negative” lane changers.

Pooling Resources

- More than one family/one generation lived in an apartment meant for fewer people.

Elderly Babysitting

- The elderly or disabled participated in all-day childcare while other family members worked minimum-wage jobs. While there are currently programs under way to support licensing these women so they can earn wages for their labor, most are watching relatives' children who can't afford to pay them and apartment landlords are reluctant to allow a licensed daycares to operate on their premises.

Social Security

- There has been an uptick in exaggerated health claims to get permanent disability status from refugees who are unable to make a living in the job market.

Second Job in the Informal Market

- This strategy was used by many refugees to acquire extra revenue on an irregular basis during extraordinarily difficult times. This was often done through activities such as lawn care, snow removal, child care, bicycle/car repair, day labor, sewing, or selling handicrafts.

Child Labor

- Some families needed their children to enter the informal work force, interrupting their education in order to meet basic needs, such as rent and groceries.

Charity

- Supplementing income with social support programs, food banks, other community charity programs



Road Blocks

- People in this group lacked English proficiency and were also the most likely to be pre-literate in their own language. This made it difficult for them to learn English at a sufficient enough level to qualify for career advancement programs.
- People in this group were not skill-less, as they were deemed by those trying to find them work. In our interviews with new rural arrivals we found they had many non-traditional skills that, with more probing, could have been uncovered and segued into more lucrative career trajectories. The barrier that surfaced was service providers' ability to identify and match non-traditional skills to living-wage career paths. For example: sewing, farming, cattle heading, cooking, fishing, community organizing, and entrepreneurship might have transitioned into living-wage careers in: fashion, agriculture, careers in fish and wildlife, and small business ownership.
- Like refugees in all previous categories who had to work multiple survival jobs in order to meet monthly expenses, these circumstances excluded them from other known time consuming career-building activities.
- This group was the most likely to arrive with experience in entrepreneurship but have no idea of how to go about starting a business in the US, or know about the small business resources available to help them. The assumption by many entrepreneurial programs that good English is prerequisite for business ownership does not always ring true, especially if it will be initially catering to an ethnic community.



Innovation Spotlight

Paul, a Hmong, was resettled in the city thirty years ago. He wanted to work with cattle as he had in Laos, but lacked the needed connections and capital, and was unaware of American loan options for small businesses. He took assembly jobs in factories where he worked for minimal wages for 25 years saving money for his dream. After retirement, he cashed in his 401k and started a cattle ranch. Other ethnic members with similar ranches walked him through the process, even sharing their resources, such as labor and machinery, to get him going. Last year, he sold over 80 cows grossing more money than he had ever made in his life. Paul suggests that newly arrived refugees be given information about small business and microcredit loans so they can move into meaningful careers that capitalize on previous skills and earn living-wages much earlier.





Driving it Home

Service Providers

- Those who operate in job placement need better HR training to be able to recognize unconventional skills in refugees and know how to segue those skills into living-wage opportunities. And, because skill recognition is so subjective, we recommend skill intake interviews be aided by computer software designed to assist with probing unconventional skill areas.

Policy Makers

- Offer an extension of resettlement benefits, like cash assistance, to refugees while they are participating in these career-laddering programs.

Employers

- Recognize that refugee employees expect a meaningful and sustainable work experience. Clearly explain to new and potential employees the career-laddering opportunities at your business, what steps need to be taken to reach each rung, an average amount of time each jump takes, and the kind of pay/benefit raise they can expect at each level. If yours isn't a job that offers those kinds of sustainable opportunities, let the refugees know how they can reasonably segue their experience at your job into a living-wage career.

Vocational Programs

- We found the required educational prerequisites for some of the living-wage courses unnecessary to perform the jobs successfully (i.e: truck driving, locksmithing, screen printing, artisan baking, pet grooming). We suggest a more expedient journey to living-wages might be facilitated by relaxing them. While a few private programs have already done this, the relaxed standards were not applied consistently and the programs were difficult to find.



Refugees bring with them traditional survival strategies and skills that are often overlooked in the process of resettlement. More needs to be done to facilitate those strategies as a bridge to living-wages.



Many participants had more than one source of income – a formal job, and an informal one that they had more control over. For example, tax preparation, taxi driving, lawn work, or selling handicrafts or garden vegetables on the side. This livelihood strategy of diversification is similar to what they relied on in their pre-exiled life where there was no social safety net.



The Recently Resettled

How have those who arrived in the United States in the past ten years fared, and how have the road conditions changed? The study group for this comparison consisted of Burundi, Congolese, Somali, Cuban, Burmese, Bhutanese, Afghan and Iraqi refugees living in Texas, predominantly, but not exclusively, in the DFW area.

In terms of our sample, the recently arrived have not yet achieved living-wages in significant numbers [Figure 4]. This reflects changes in the way the American work force hires and promotes people, cuts to support programs over the last 30 years, and the relatively higher cost of living in relation to minimum wages. While there are many programs in America to help the unemployed and underemployed career-ladder, this figure reflects that refugees just aren't being serviced by them. This should give us pause, as it suggests that our approach to rapid survival employment in the resettlement system needs to offer more intentional bridges to career-building strategies if it is to lead to long-term self-sufficiency.

This next section lists some of the specific road blocks mentioned by today's newcomers and suggests how we might facilitate the more successful strategies used by refugees in the past.

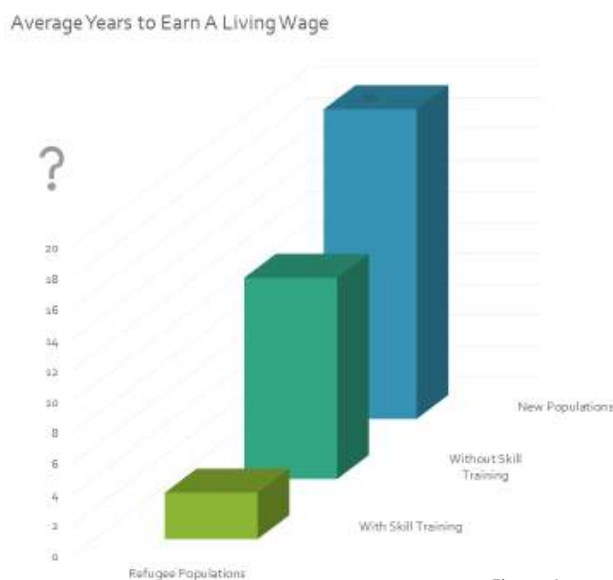


Figure 4



Lane Changers

Using Unconventional Assets

- Not all stereotypes are bad. We found the Burmese community, for example, turning their pan-Asian appearance into a lucrative opportunity to fill America's growing hunger for sushi. Even though most have never seen or eaten the delicacy before coming to the US, they now own and operate an estimated 80% of that market across the US.*

Using Skills Learned in Asylum

- We found many auto mechanic and tire shops run and operated by refugees who reported learning the skill out of necessity while in an asylum country. Others credited their UNHCR camp guard training as being useful in their current work in security.

Skill Programs with Relaxed Requirements

- Many new arrivals have only received a primary school education. Disqualified for most vocational programs, they found private programs with relaxed education and/or language prerequisites, such as trucking or artisan baking. These programs quickly led to living-wage jobs.

* John Lantigua The Palm Beach Post, 2008

The same lack of access to career-laddering opportunities that forced previous refugees to engage in negative lane changing strategies, have led to similar negative forms of engagement today. We found examples of:

- Working two full time jobs
- Multiple families sharing a two-bedroom apartment
- Selling handicrafts in the informal market or other under the table work
- Drawing Social Security while engaging in the informal market.



Road Blocks

- Over the past 30 years funding cuts to cash assistance have reduced the amount of initial support for a refugee family from 36 months (1981) to 4-6 months (2016). This is not enough time for a skilled refugee to transfer their credentials to enter the workforce at living-wages, and not enough time for limited language learners to acquire sufficient English proficiency to enter vocational programs. This time limitation means most refugees have to accept minimal wage work with few career-laddering possibilities.
- Recent arrivals tend to have lower English language skills than other immigrants, which limit their ability to find work and earn enough to support their families. Experts* estimate that it takes 500-1,000 hours of ESL instruction for adults who are literate in their own language to become proficient enough to communicate effectively for middle-wage work.



Innovation Spotlight

A Burmese man and his wife founded Hissho Sushi in their dining room in Charlotte, N.C., providing daily fresh sushi to supermarkets and cafés. Today, the food service and distribution company manages and operates more than 400 sushi bars in supermarkets, airports, hospitals, and universities across the United States, employing thousands of Burmese refugees, many of whom have taken these skills and started their own successful sushi businesses.



Contemporary ESL classes are taught at 2 to 6 hour intervals a week, which translates to as long as 5-10 years before a new arrival is positioned to have the communication skills to career ladder.

- Most new arrivals have spent extend periods of time in refugee camps and have not had access to education beyond a primary level, making them ineligible to meet the educational prerequisites to enter the technical training programs that could propel them into living-wages.
- Many professional and educational credentials still don't transfer and the cost to re-credential in the US is exorbitant and unrealistic for someone making minimum wage. We found otherwise qualified refugees being exploited by employers who had them performing living-wage services for minimum wages because they lacked the credentials.
- Refugees can't afford vocational training while working a minimum-wage job. While there are now WIOA funds, similar to CETA, to help pay for training, refugees seldom have the luxury of engaging in them while working multiple jobs.
- Refugees in this study working minimum-wage jobs knew little or nothing about whether their employer offered living-wage opportunities or what it would take to move into them. While all of our participants wanted to shift into more sustainable positions, they had no idea what those opportunities were, where to find them, what steps they needed to take to engage them, or where they would go to find this information.



Free tuition is not enough. Refugees need a means to make a living while enrolled in skill-building classes.

- Many of the groups arriving today have cultural humility practices that would preclude them from asking for a raise, advocating for their advancement, or boasting of their knowledge. More work needs to be done by cultural brokers to advocate on behalf of newcomers and bring more cultural awareness of refugee populations into the workforce.
- Recent arrivals who had valuable skills lacked an understanding of how that skill is performed or aided by technology in the US. For example, rural farmers lacked an understanding of mechanized farm equipment, construction workers lacked knowledge about the use of power tools and OSHA rules, or bakers were unfamiliar with how to use modern industrial kitchen equipment. In these cases, they would have benefited from a short bridge course to bolster their vocation-specific vocabulary and address these skill gaps without having to start again from the beginning. Computer literacy courses were the only such bridge course we could find in operation, however, those who graduated with a certificate in, for example, Microsoft Word, had difficulty understanding how that translated into a specific living-wage job.
- All refugees noted the extreme difficulty in making rent every month, some saying it was all they could think about. The availability of affordable, subsidized, and Section 8 housing certificates for refugees could go a long way in allowing them the temporary hand up they need to get training that would bring in higher wages without losing the roof over their heads.



Driving it Home

Service Providers

- Make sure a refugee's first employer offers them a clear picture of where they stand and the path to living-wages within their companies, and make sure they are given detailed knowledge of how they can build a living-wage career before they drop out of your purview.

Policy Makers

- Expand the Section 8 program to offer a guaranteed certificate to refugee arrivals, and facilitate a more streamlined, less expensive, and more expansive transfer of foreign credentials.

Community Organizations

- Because of the busy schedules of those on minimum wage and the number of hours it takes to learn English, make available to refugees quality on-line and cell-phone driven ESL programs that they can take whenever they want and as much as they can. Programs like this already exist, but are cost prohibitive for refugees.

Employers

- Be more intentional in connecting living-wage opportunities with the unconventional skills, global talent and potential that refugees bring. Understanding these possibilities should be an incentive to invest in creating more hands-on training opportunities that facilitate this transition.

Workforce Development

- Invest in the creation of short bridge courses, or skill bootcamps, that help address the gap between previously acquired skills and the industry-specific language and technology needed for the refugee to be competitive in the US.



Traditional ESL programs do not work for contemporary refugees in the way they used to because of the tighter demands of their time. More needs to be done to make accessible new smart phone technology that delivers high quality ESL instruction to refugees on demand.



Living-wage skills learned in asylum can assist refugees to career-ladder after resettlement. Pre-arrival refugee livelihood programs could provide more intentional and effective training before resettlement.



We found that there is a fundamental lack of cultural awareness regarding the difference between what a “job” and a “career” means in the US. Many Burmese and Bhutanese informants noted they just wanted any job, and characterized a “good job” as one that paid enough money for them to merely survive. The majority of informants did not mention a desire to engage in a career path that offered substantial growth opportunities. This is troubling, as we found in refugee populations who’ve been in the US for 30+ years that it takes between 5-8 years of working in a dead-end job to realize you are on a path to nowhere. Thus, the negative implications of not understanding this distinction are far reaching in terms of stunting the acceleration into living-wage positions.

Sharing the Road



The Employer



Employers in living-wage job sectors with projected work force shortages are generally not aware of refugees' skills and capacities, and therefore, overlook refugee populations as a solution to their long-term industry needs.

After talking to many employers about their businesses, we found that those who were the most aware of a potential refugee workforce were those who employed large numbers of workers in entry-level positions with few opportunities for career advancement. These employers often lauded the committed and reliable employees coming from the refugee pool and often recruited directly from refugee service providers, some even offering ESL during lunch hours.

In contrast, businesses who employed people at living-wages were mostly unaware of this workforce and hadn't considered them as a potential recruitment pool. Those who had a few refugees currently working for them had no knowledge that those employees had entered the US under that status, and many were confused as to what a refugee was and if they had legal work rights. These employers were mostly under the impression that newcomers arrive without the skills their business needs.

When asked what skills they perceived newcomers lacked, living-wage employers cited:

1. **Knowledge of OSHA safety standards. They thought this put their companies at risk for unnecessary accidents.**
2. **Technical knowledge. Many stated newcomers often don't know how to use the mechanized equipment that is necessary for the job in America.**
3. **English language proficiency. Even those who had some English often lacked the vocation-specific vocabulary necessary to function in living-wage positions.**
4. **Required certifications. Some refugees had come to employers claiming they had the skills and pre-flight experience, but not the recognized certification necessary to hire them.**

Some living-wage employers saw refugees' potential. Instead of citing their lack of skills, employers recognized their unique skill sets. Interpreting services, for example, largely hired refugees at living-wages. Some trucking and HVAC companies experiencing employee shortages, have created ways to help refugees overcome any deficiencies, seeing them as a long-term, dependable answer to their industry labor shortages.

These positive examples were few. In general, employers saw refugees as people needing help from an employer (to get a job), not as a potential driver for the company's economic growth. Some saw the process of developing and administering the kinds of support services necessary to insure refugee success as daunting, while others simply didn't think their business had the capacity to engage in workforce training at scale.* Encouragingly, after some discussion, some employers whose industries were in a labor shortage were willing to recognize refugees as a potential part of their industries' long-term sustainable growth and willing to further discuss how they might facilitate this match.



Innovation Spotlight

Truck driving pays a living-wage and requires few prerequisites other than a knowledge of driving and the rules of the road. One particular trucking company in Texas teaches a certification course suited to those who have driven in other countries and who have limited English. This company sees refugees with pre-arrival truck driving experience as an answer to their labor shortages. Refugees are among their best recruits; in fact, many refugees now own their own rigs and serve as independent

Service Providers



Service providers need better tools to access refugee skills, broader connections with living-wage employers, more training, and more time to connect them in meaningful ways.

Service providers who work directly in connecting refugees to employment opportunities were generally frustrated at the lack of time they had to assess skills and get their clients into a job (just 4-6 months in Texas, 6-8 elsewhere). They were aware that this time limitation, on top of their high client caseloads, often meant placing the refugee in whatever job the agency could find, which generally were, what one provider called, “the low hanging fruit”, or with employers who needed large numbers of unskilled labor at minimal wages with limited chances to career-ladder.

Service providers also cited not having the training or Human Resource background to understand which unconventional skills could transition into which living-wage opportunities, nor did they have relationships with “those kinds of employers.” Service providers also noted that the barriers faced by refugees to qualify for higher wage jobs (vocational training, ESL, certification transfer) are not surmountable in the short time they have to get a client into a job. For this reason providers concentrate on getting their clients into any employment so that clients can pay their rent. In the words of one provider: “It breaks my heart. I know there is more we could do if we had the tools. In most cases, we’re setting them up for years of unnecessary government dependency.”

In some cases, more innovative agencies were piloting their own ESL-to-Job-Readiness classes. However, the ones that we observed were usually training their clients for entry into minimal-wage industries (sewing, food service, babysitting, and housekeeping). While these programs helped clients find entry-level work, they have not yet facilitated real career-laddering opportunities.

Service providers also thought they would be more successful in connecting refugees to more sustainable employment if government support for clients’ basic needs were extended to at least a year. This would allow refugees to engage in full-time English and/or vocational instruction with child care, thus expanding options for higher-paying jobs and giving the provider sufficient time to identify more meaningful job opportunities. They also wanted better access and training in how to engage with a broader spectrum of employers, technology that would more consistently aid their skill assessment of refugees, and employment search programs that would link those skills to higher-paying professions.



Innovation Spotlight

Upwardly Global is a US nonprofit organization working exclusively with skilled immigrants and refugees by providing job search training and connecting them with employers seeking to develop a pipeline of global talent. Upwardly Global has helped more than 3,000 job seekers rebuild their careers in the U.S. through an extensive online program, as well as one-on-one assistance from a job coach. The average income gain for a refugee who has gone through their mentoring is \$40,000 in one year of upgraded job placement. For more information about Upwardly Global, visit www.upwardlyglobal.org.

Refugees

Not surprisingly, refugees had a lot to say about how their road out of poverty could have been shortened. Many acknowledged that were not ready for the demands of a living-wage job upon arrival, citing that they needed time to learn the language, how the US job sector operates, what kinds of professions exist in this country, and the skills to be competitive in them. However, they regret the lack of resources available to them to reach these goals when they were ready. “By this time we are out of the system [refugee service provider care], and there is no one to steer us. We just stumble along trying to figure it out.”

Even when refugees were ready to invest in upward mobility, working two minimum-wage jobs just to make ends meet leaves them little time.

“I want to do these things, yes. But I work all the time. The rents in this area are so high that it’s all I can think about. I need to pay the rent so we are not living on the street.”

After years of unnecessarily struggling, when they do finally find their way to a sustainable income, they think ‘If I had only had more support, I would have been here quicker.’ All of the resources we take for granted – libraries, unemployment agencies, community colleges, financial aid, on-line programs, the Small Business Association, community resources, our knowledge of the vast array of jobs in America and their various training programs– are all foreign to the newcomer. The years (if ever) that it takes to discover them are years wasted in poverty and dependency.

Refugees would like to see more intentional ESL programs that would lead them to specific job opportunities, they would like help with understanding which career paths are sustainable, more accessible vocational training programs, help with child care during training, broader recognition of their past credentials and experiences, more information from employers as to what the career-laddering possibilities are and what it takes to advance into them.

They would also like to see at least a year of support to be able to better position themselves for long-term success. Those supplementing their incomes in cottage industry work would like more refugee-friendly small business information on how to bring their businesses out of the shadows.

“We want what you want.” Said one participant who, 30 years after arrival, runs a thriving business. *“We want the dignity to support ourselves and our families without a handout. We just need more direction in how to get there. Show us, and we will.”*



Solutions
Ahead



Conclusion

This research has captured a wide range of data on refugee upward mobility, how refugees have fared, the road blocks they've faced in achieving living-wages, and the strategies used to bypass these obstacles and move into the Fastlane. What makes this study distinctive is its bottom-up approach of defining those positions from the perspective of multiple stakeholders – refugees, service providers, and employers. There are ten important lessons that can be drawn from this data about upward mobility in the context of resettlement.

First, entry into the US labor market, in and of itself, does not lead to a sustainable livelihood.

The data from this study challenges the deeply held assumption that if we get a refugee as quickly as possible into any job, it will lead to a sustainable livelihood. Our data suggests that without additional support of intensive and intentional ESL, affordable housing, skill training, or opportunities to capitalize on preexisting skills, it can take an average of 13-15 years to reach living-wages. Moreover, refugees are often having to supplement their income with long periods of government social support or, in some cases, even engage in negative and potentially dangerous strategies in order to get by.

Second, refugees who, took advantage of government sponsored vocational training were able to jump to living-wages within an average of a year of those opportunities, giving the tax payer a return on investment of 613%.

Third, employment opportunities, such as on the job training or skill mentoring, that built on existing experiences, limited educational backgrounds, and utilized hands-on experience were the most effective in speeding up the transition to living-wages for those who could not enter traditional skill training programs.

These programs sped the path to living-wages by as much as seven years.

Fourth, resettlement policy that emphasizes employment within a few weeks of arrival encourages refugees to take ill-placed “survival jobs” in unrelated fields to previous skills with little or no possibility for advancement.

While this solves the “problem” of getting refugees to work, we now understand that it falls short of aiding them in long-term self-sufficiency. It undermines important structural supports and bridge building efforts critical to becoming competitive for living-wages in the workforce.

Fifth, Current ESL curricula that are detached from vocational training, take anywhere from 5-10 years to prepare someone for entrance into a vocational institution.

This time was significantly cut down when the ESL instruction was combined with vocationally-specific skill training and the soft skills to help newcomers navigate the workforce.

Sixth, A lack of knowledge and resources about how to move into the Fastlane was the most often cited reason for remaining in the slow one.

Many refugees arrive with different understandings of what we mean by “skills,” the difference between a job and a career, what kinds of US jobs pay living-wages, and the steps it takes to career-ladder into them. Participants in our study did not have access to these important resources after they left the service-provider umbrella nor did they know where to find them.

Seventh, Service providers tasked with helping refugees find initial work are inadequately prepared to recognize unconventional skills and ambitions, or match them to jobs with living-wage career-trajectories.

While all wanted to be able to do this more effectively, they simply didn't have the backgrounds, training, tools, support, connections within the community, or time under their current contractual restraints to do so.

Eighth, Employers who pay living-wages were the least likely to be aware of this potential workforce, or understand how a refugee's skills and talents could be a source of meeting their future economic growth.

This is the most critically important in the professions with a skilled employee shortage. After introducing the idea, employers were generally interested in considering this population as a solution to their labor needs if certain refugee-specific concerns could be addressed in skill training and if they had input in its curriculum development to make sure what is being taught meets their industry needs.

Ninth, Self-employment was an ill-understood and underutilized option for refugees.

Many newcomers arrived with entrepreneurial skills, ambition, and built-in global networks to run successful businesses and saw self-employment as a way to control their own destiny in an unfamiliar land. Refugees who had eventually started businesses were generally frustrated by the unnecessarily long time it took because they didn't understand the regulatory system in America. Refugee entrepreneurs estimate that they would have opened their business years earlier than they did, had they had reliable guidance or knew where to find it.

Tenth, Asylum can be an important place of skill acquisition.

Recognizing this, more connection needs to be made between UNHCR livelihood units and resettlement countries to coordinate and capitalize on these important training opportunities.

Eleventh, Stakeholders will need to facilitate more collaborative discussions that give equal weight to the positions of the affected populations if they want to make self-sufficiency a reality.

Early in the study a picture emerged resembling the parable of the “Blind Men and the Elephant,” where a group of blind men presented with an elephant described a different part of the animal as they experienced it, each vehemently believing their perspective was representative of the whole animal. True to the parable, as we approached each stakeholder about the barriers and enabling environments experienced in career-laddering, they each gave the story from their perspective, all the while, displaying little knowledge of how much other stakeholders identified with their perspective, or perceived success or failure along the same nodes by which they were measuring them. Moreover, because these good intentioned groups traditionally work in silos, like the blind men, it was difficult for any of them to account for the totality of perspectives needed to enable the desired success. More robust pathways to living-wage jobs can only be developed through improved information sharing between employers, community-based organizations, education providers, service providers, and refugees.



Innovation Spotlight

Started by a master baker with a passion for social justice, the Hot Bread Kitchen works to increase economic security for refugee and immigrant women in NYC by providing artisan baking and culinary business skills training to succeed in the higher paying specialty food industry. It's a job that is both culturally sensitive to ideas of “women's work”, market demands, and living wage.



Recommendations

Is there a way to combine existing structures and programs in the United States to facilitate the capacities and upward mobility of refugee populations while simultaneously filling the labor shortage in living-wage industries, reducing the amount of government dependency, and adding to the strength of the US economy? We think there is. What follows is a list of suggestions drawn from the experiences and lessons learned in this project.

- ***Intentional effort needs to be spent identifying the jobs in America that pay living-wages, have a labor shortage, have projected growth, have the fewest educational prerequisites, and for which relatively short training programs already exist. These programs should be targeted to incorporate vocational-specific ESL into the instruction as an accessible on-ramp to these careers for newcomers .***

While this list would have to be continuously monitored and updated, we have found the following jobs to fit this criteria:

Animal Husbandry	Metal Working
Artisan Baking	Pet Grooming
Automotive Technology	Phlebotomy
Building Maintenance	Scaffolding Builders
Certified Child Care	Security Professional
CNA	Solar Insulator
Construction	Teacher's Aide
Crane Workers	Truck Driving
Dental Assistants	Urban Agriculture
Energy Technician	Welding
Forklift Operation	Wind
Heavy Equipment Operation	Small Business Ownership
Machinist	

- ***Address living-wage industry leaders about investing in the one-time creation of a non-proprietary, ESL-to-Vocation curriculum that could be offered by public and private vocational institutions.***

This would be a partnership between the ESL curriculum developers, vocational instructors and industry leaders to make sure the vocational curriculum will make its graduates competitive for jobs, addressing any concerns that would arise in hiring a refugee. For example, would it alleviate a potential employer's safety concerns if a workplace first aid and OSHA 10 certification were added to the curriculum? What kinds of cultural concerns, technology and 'soft skills' might need to be woven into the course to accommodate a newcomer? These programs could innovatively take advantage of technologies already familiar to newcomers, such as

smart phone industry specific vocabulary apps.*

- ***The federal government should invest in extended benefits for those enrolled in career-laddering programs.***

The short-term investment in allowing refugees the financial security to finish needed skill and language programming will save the government in long-term support assistance and add to the country's economy and tax revenue over the long-run.

- ***The federal government should increase its already existing Section 8 program to guarantee certificates to refugees as part of their entry benefit package.***

Expanding this already existing program will allow a refugee family to engage in other long-term self-sufficiency gaining programs without having to work two jobs just to afford their rent. Because rent under Section 8 is paid on a sliding scale in proportion to income, as the refugee becomes self-sufficient, the amount of government benefit decreases until, eventually, the certificate is returned.

- ***Offer mandatory one-year post-arrival career-laddering seminars for refugees.***

A well developed, standard curriculum would introduce refugees to the abundance of living-wage opportunities in the United States, the steps that need to be taken to move from where they are into living-wages, the resources available in the community to help them get there, and where to get career planning help after they leave the auspices of the placement agency. This seminar could be supplemented with testimony from refugees who have been successful using various strategies, and visits from vocational schools and from the Small Business Administration. Every refugee should leave the resettlement program informed with tangible steps – or ladders – and resources for upward mobility that they can refer to for the rest of their lives. According to our participants, this virtually free and easy-to- implement program could be the single biggest facilitator in a more rapid rise to self-sufficiency.



* See English Discoveries at www.englishdiscoveries.net, or Words to Learn app.

- **All employers of new arrivals should present their employee with a clear presentation of the career-laddering opportunities available at that job, what concrete steps need to be taken to reach each rung, the wages an employee can reasonably expect to make at each level, and the approximate time it takes to advance.**

It might be helpful for resettlement agencies to provide their employers with a ladder template to fill in. This is a reasonable ask. It will simultaneously give refugees a realistic picture of where they stand and discourage employers from exploiting this workforce. Our study participants said that without this information many of them faithfully labored for years at the bottom rung of a factory's ladder without knowing that there wasn't any chance of advancement into living-wages. Had they had that information up front, they would have looked for other options with better long-term possibilities earlier on.

- **Aid refugees in creating their own support organizations.**

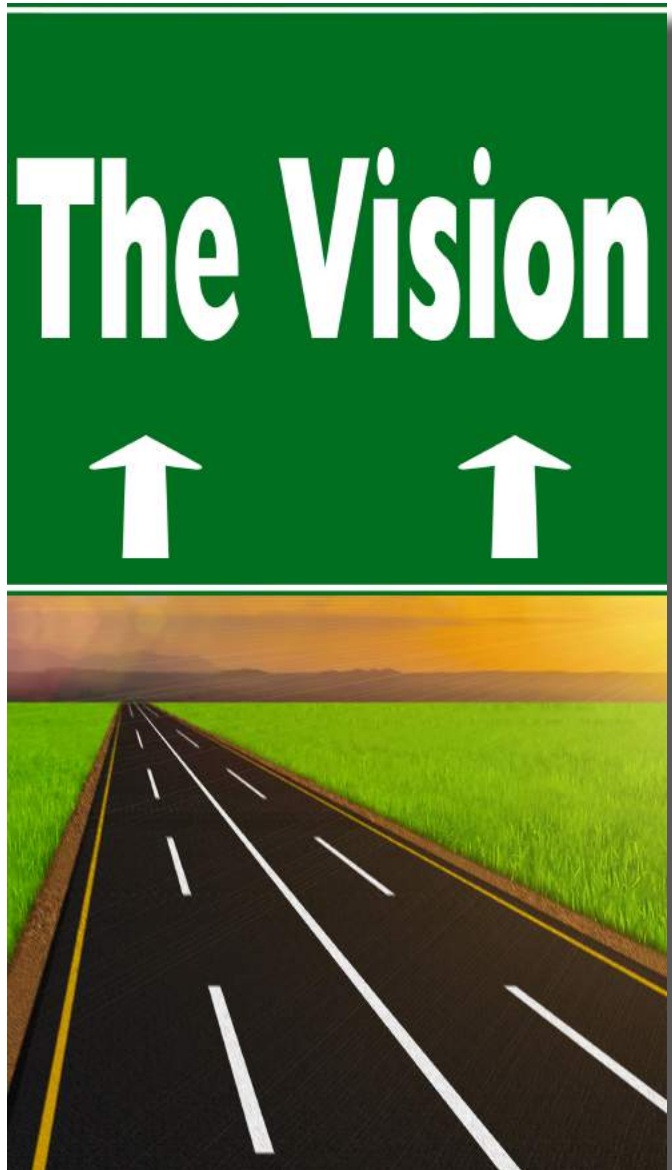
Most newcomers eventually organize in some capacity, however, this doesn't usually take place until a quorum of successful leaders have emerged. New communities could also benefit from such organization, especially when it comes to representation of their ideas and cultural barriers to employers. This is a great opportunity for community organizations to lend their meeting space, a copy machine, pot of coffee, and other supplies to newcomers. Workforce Development offices should prioritize these organizations as repositories for their employment and career-laddering information. Better yet - bring WIOA information sessions to their door.

- **Consider beginning training programs overseas while refugees are waiting to enter the United States.**

Refugees identified for resettlement often wait two or more years before being relocated. Once identified, these people could begin their livelihood training overseas making their time in refugee camps more productive and their entry into the US workforce more meaningful.

- **The Small Business Administration should continue to expand their SCORE mentoring program into refugee communities.**

Utilizing successful business people from within those communities as mentors, the SBA could tie existing small business mentorship and resources to refugees within their own communities and with appropriate cultural sensitivity. Such efforts are already underway in Dallas, TX.



Toward an Expanded Relationship for Global Solutions

Capturing the enabling environments for sustainable livelihoods from each of the stake holders and collaboratively designing solutions in a way that is neither bottom-up or top-down holds promise beyond the US. For example, what if skill training programs for multinational corporations could begin in protracted situations? Not only would it prepare those bound for resettlement for living-wage jobs, it could simultaneously train a skilled workforce in protracted situations and open up new potential markets for the private sector. In this way, we propose an expanded relationship between refugees, resettlement States, humanitarian actors and the private sector in reciprocal livelihood innovation.

“I just want to say thank you for coming to my home and asking me what I think. When I am able to speak out, I feel free. Like a weight has been lifted. I have been here four years and nobody has ever asked.”