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Living conditions and relocations among refugees in Norway, in light of the government's resettlement work

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Summary

Chapter 1 Introduction

The report deals with the authorities' strategies for the settlement of refugees in the country's municipalities. A living-conditions approximation serves as the basis for the analysis, in that the various strategies are evaluated according to their impact upon refugee living conditions after a four to five year period from initial settlement.

Central areas of concern are:

- To what degree can discrepancies in refugee integration histories be ascribed to the settlement strategies applied at initial refugee settlement?
- How does the settlement strategy affect later refugee relocation history?
- How are political objectives in refugee settlement to be pursued by the relevant parties concerned? Through agreement upon perceived objectives between the various levels within the public administration, as well as between the authorities and refugees?

The most important sources of data are:

- Personal interviews with 500 refugees settled in the years 1994-96
- Personal interviews in 15 municipalities with employees from government departments responsible for the integration and qualification of refugees
- Telephone interviews in 120 municipalities with refugee consultants or persons with equivalent areas of responsibility
- Records from the Directorate of Immigration's refugee records and census rolls

Chapter 2 Settlement strategies

The practical task of assigning refugees to the various municipalities is carried out by the regional offices of the Directorate of Immigration. Municipalities receive a government grant per refugee settled, and are free to decide themselves how many refugees they wish to settle.

The primary goals for the settling of refugees can be summarised by three points: 1) that each refugee become self-supporting as quickly as possible, 2) that repatriation be considered when a

realistic alternative, 3) that secondary relocation take place as infrequently as possible. To achieve these goals the authorities have, amongst other things, formulated certain guidelines or strategies for the work of refugee settlement:

- To achieve rapid settlement/ direct settlement for particular groups
- To build national or ethnic groups
- To settle refugees close to family and relatives
- To take into consideration the refugees' own wishes regarding place of residence
- To settle refugees throughout the entire country
- To settle refugees according to work and education opportunities
- To settle refugees with health problems in municipalities with the necessary facilities
- To settle refugees according to the ability of municipalities to carry out the work of integration

We have analysed five of these strategies with a view towards establishing to what degree they are being implemented and to what degree they have affected the integration history of refugees in Norway.

- *To achieve rapid settlement.* According to government guidelines, as a general rule settlement should take place within six months of the refugee's being granted residency. Processing of residency applications should take no longer than six months, which means that no-one should remain in refugee shelters for any longer than one year. This objective has not been met over the period in question. Of all refugees settled from refugee shelters in the period 1994-96 only one third were settled within one year.
- *To build national or ethnic groups of a certain size in a municipality or in a restricted region* The effectiveness of this strategy is difficult to assess because the definition of how large a group should be and over how long a period it should be built up is not clear. We investigated group building at the municipality level and discovered that a significant number of refugees are settled in municipalities where group building is not a priority. The more remote the municipality, the less importance is attached to group building.
- *To settle refugees close to family and relatives* More than half of the refugees were settled close enough to their families to visit them regularly. However, whether this represents successful goal achievement or not rests upon the size of the refugee group with family in Norway at the time of settlement, information which we unfortunately do not possess. A survey of the reasons for relocation showed that the wish to live closer to family was one of the most important reasons for relocating, which indicates that the potential for settlement close to family is not being fully realised.
- *To take into consideration the refugees' own wishes regarding place of residence* Almost 70 percent of the refugees in the sample group who had an opinion about where they wanted to live reported that their own wishes were taken into account in the selection of a settlement municipality. This is a good result, particularly in view of the large number of refugees who were settled in the period. Even so, there are large discrepancies between the groups, and the Iraqis are the group which felt that their wishes were taken into consideration least.

- *To settle refugees throughout the entire country* Since 1994 it has been an objective that refugees should be settled throughout the entire country. This objective has been achieved to a reasonable extent, as refugees are indeed settled in all counties. Moreover, the proportion of refugees settled in each county corresponds roughly to the county proportion of the overall population.
- *To settle refugees according to work and education opportunities, to relevant health facilities and to the ability of municipalities to carry out the work of integration.* This question has not been evaluated with quantitative data. Feedback from the regional offices of the Directorate of Immigration which are responsible for the actual settling of each refugee suggests that the offices have not had the capacity to consider these strategies effectively.

Some of the settlement strategies in question can be difficult to reconcile with the other strategies. For example, it is difficult to establish larger ethnic or national groups in one place while at the same time settle refugees throughout the entire country. It is difficult, moreover, to implement the settlement strategies effectively when many of the resources at the disposal of the Directorate of Immigration are consumed in the negotiations with the municipalities over how many refugees they will accept. This applies particularly this year with settlement needs being so great.

As far as we can judge, there exists a sound mutual understanding between the Ministry of Regional Government, the Directorate of Immigration and the municipalities which settle refugees, as to which are the prevailing settlement strategies. Nevertheless, there is noticeable frustration among many in the municipalities who believe that rapid settlement is being prioritised at the expense of the other strategies, in particular the matching of refugee skills and experience to the local work and education market. The same frustration can be found, however, in the Ministry of Labour and Local Government and in the Directorate of Immigration, where a strong responsibility is felt for achieving the strategy of rapid settlement.

Chapter 3 Living conditions

- The adult refugee population is young compared to the Norwegian population.
- The incidence of both psychological and physiological health problems is extensive. Health moreover is an important factor in both language learning and in the effective execution of one's job. The municipalities report a lack of capacity when it comes to addressing the special and complex health problems from which many of the refugees suffer.
- The great majority of refugees take part in Norwegian language classes; however, few actually complete the course.
- Employment levels within all refugee groups are clearly lower than in the Norwegian population. Employment levels are particularly low among Somali and Iraqi women.
- The refugees' financial situation is clearly affected by the difficulties they encounter in the work market. Income levels even among those who have a job are low and receipt of social security payments is widespread in all the refugee groups.
- The broad majority of refugees have good social contact with persons from the same ethnic group. There is less contact with Norwegians, which applies to both contact

through Norwegian friends and through participation in organisations. Iraqi and Somali women in particular have little contact with Norwegians.

- According to the refugees themselves the most important factors for achieving a sense of well-being are a job, education opportunities and being able to live with or near family. Somalis and Iraqis also mention a good house as a determining factor.

Chapter 4 Settlement strategies and living conditions

The chapter analyses how refugee living conditions have been affected by the various settlement strategies four to six years after initial settlement. Living conditions are measured using one set of living-conditions indicators.

- Economic integration, measured through employment participation, the refugees' experience of having difficulty meeting current expenses and of receiving social security payments.
- Social integration into the Norwegian society, measured through Norwegian skills, contact with Norwegian friends and participation in Norwegian organisations.
- Health, measured through the extent of depressions, nervous problems and physical ailments (ailments which hamper everyday life).
- *Rapid settlement* appears to have certain positive effects on economic integration: refugees who were settled quickly report fewer problems in meeting their current expenses than those who were settled less quickly. However, there is no noticeable effect upon the other economic indicators or upon the health of refugees. A possible explanation for the effect upon the ability to meet current expenses might be that extended periods spent in refugee shelters produces a client mentality: refugees who have been in shelters over long periods of time become less able to handle their own finances. Moreover, we find that refugees who have been in shelters for extended periods are rarely weaker in Norwegian than those who have spent only a short time in shelters. This might suggest that Norwegian instruction in the shelters is as good as the instruction provided by many settlement municipalities; although it could also be that refugees who have spent long periods in shelters may simply have been in Norway longer, our respondents being drawn on the basis of year of settlement, not arrival in Norway.
- *Settlement according to the refugees' own wishes* appears to be a significant factor both for economic integration and for the health of refugees. Refugees settled according to their own wishes report fewer problems in managing their own finances and less dependency on social security assistance. An exception is the Yugoslav group where social security dependency is in fact greater among those settled according to their own wishes. We also found that those refugees who felt that their own wishes were taken into consideration in the choice of settlement municipality experienced a lower incidence of psychological health problems.
- Refugees *settled in central municipalities* are more dependent upon social security than other refugees. They also have less contact with Norwegian friends than refugees who were settled initially in less central municipalities.

- Refugees settled *in municipalities where many other refugees* from the same ethnic group have been settled are better at Norwegian than other refugees. They are also less dependent upon social security assistance.
- Refugees settled *close to family* are better at Norwegian than other refugees.
- In regard to refugee employment levels, we find that the official settlement strategies applied during the period in question have had no impact, unless we define *"the taking into consideration of the ability of municipalities to carry out qualification work"* as a settlement strategy. Such consideration has been only limited in the settlement work of the authorities during the 90's. We find however that an emphasis by the municipalities upon parallel programmes of work experience with Norwegian instruction, together with a close follow-up of the refugees, has a clear positive effect upon refugee employment.

Chapter 5 Secondary relocation: where, why and so what?

- Refugees essentially have the same right as Norwegians to live wherever they like, but if they are dependent upon social security assistance then special regulations apply which govern relocation during the first five years after initial settlement in a municipality.
- One third of all refugees settled in Norway during the period 1994-1996 were relocated from the initial settlement municipality before the end of 1999. Relocation within each region was directed primarily towards cities or larger municipalities. Relocation away from the region of initial settlement was greatest in northern Norway (Nord-Norge) and least in eastern Norway (Østlandet). Relocation from the least central municipalities was twice as high as relocation from the most central municipalities.
- Yugoslavs, Bosnians, Iraqis and Somalis relocated at more or less the same rate from their initial settlement municipalities, but displayed different relocation patterns in regard to which parts of the country they moved to. The Bosnians relocated mainly within the region in which they were initially settled, most often to a smaller municipality than that chosen by the other national groups.
- Relocation is highest among young adults. Moreover, men relocate more often than women, single persons more often than married persons, and earlier applicants for asylum and family-reunion refugees more often than transfer refugees.
- The refugees themselves give two reasons for relocation: they wanted to live closer to family and/or friends, or they had been offered work in another municipality or had hoped to be able to find work in another municipality. For refugees who relocated from the most northern counties the weather was another important factor in their decision to move. Municipality representatives were also asked why refugees left their municipalities or moved to them, and broadly speaking they gave the same relocation reasons as the refugees.

- A central question that extends this survey of relocation and the reasons for relocation, is how refugees coped after they moved from their initial settlement municipality. We discovered that more of those refugees who had moved were in paid employment than those who remained behind in the initial settlement municipality. Those who moved also enjoyed better health, both with respect to ailments that hamper everyday life and to depressions and nervous problems. The positive effect of relocation upon employment thus remained firm after our investigation into the question of refugee health. However, overcrowded living conditions was a more widespread problem among those who moved than among those who remained behind in the initial settlement municipality.
- We found the most obvious effects of relocation however in the refugees' own sense of well-being. A constant finding throughout all four nationality groups was that the sense of well-being increased markedly after relocation.
- Three out of ten municipalities react negatively to refugee relocation before completion of the integration grant period. The most important reasons for this according to the municipalities are that refugee relocation makes it more difficult for them to carry out profitable qualification work and to plan their housing programmes. Among municipalities with the highest rates of relocation, not being able to plan effectively is cited as the most negative factor.
- Approximately half the municipalities which took part in the quantitative survey say that refugees on their own initiative settle in their municipality direct from the refugee shelter. The majority of these municipalities regard such self-settling as positive, most importantly because when the refugees present themselves to the municipality they already have both a job and a place to live.

Chapter 6, Challenges facing the work of settlement

- In the last chapter the findings of the report are summed up through an assessment of the authorities' settlement strategies: To what degree do the strategies contribute to the achievement of the primary goals of economic and social integration, as well as to the limiting of secondary relocation? We also present proposals for new strategies/revised emphases of the original strategies.
- As regards economic integration, an important finding is that discrepancies in the qualification work carried out by the municipalities appear to be a significant factor in determining which refugees find a job. Moreover, both the municipalities and the regional offices of the Directorate of Immigration would like to see the Directorate of Immigration pay greater attention to this qualification work. The remaining settlement strategies appear to be having little effect upon the economic integration of refugees, particularly in regard to employment.
- Further social integration emerges as the most pressing challenge facing settlement and qualification work. Emphasising the creation of meeting places for refugees and Norwegians - for example, by encouraging more volunteer workers to take part in integration work - is one possible approach to this challenge. With the exception of refugees settled in the less central municipalities, the settlement strategies in question

have little effect upon the amount of contact refugees have with Norwegian friends. And as it is not really feasible to settle all refugees in the less central municipalities, there is thus great need for good models of social integration.

- In regard to secondary relocation, the effect of the settlement strategies is more pronounced. Settlement according to the refugees' own wishes, settlement near family, and settlement near work and educational opportunities, contributes strongly to the reduction of secondary relocation. On the other hand, settlement in northern Norway and in the less central municipalities of country areas contributes to an increase in secondary relocation. Moreover, if more attention were paid to refugee background - whether they came from urban or rural areas – then secondary relocation from less central municipalities might be reduced. For example, in less central municipalities refugees from a rural background remain settled much more than refugees from an urban background.
- Altogether, the strategies evaluated have the potential to affect refugee living conditions in all the areas we have examined. In other words, it is reasonable to conclude that the strategies are both good and well-founded strategies. However, the effectiveness of the strategies when it comes to economic and social integration is limited; there is a need to place greater emphasis upon local integration and qualification work if these goals are to be achieved. The positive effect the settlement strategies can have upon refugee integration histories is dependent, however, upon the ability of the Directorate of Immigration to implement the strategies, also in those years when settlement needs are great. The attempt to settle as many refugees as possible within six months of residency being granted is often at the expense of the other strategies.