



'We have to educate both sides: working with the refugee community and telling them, "this is what you're going to need to get there", and also making sure that the door is going to be open on the other side as well.'

'People with refugee backgrounds can do the job.'

Refugee-background experiences of employment in Wellington.

**A report prepared by
ChangeMakers Refugee Forum**

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*The best job is a job that satisfies me, where I feel I am doing something good,
where I feel I am contributing something.*

Executive Summary

Obtaining meaningful employment – adequately remunerated, fulfilling employment that is commensurate with a person’s skills and qualifications – is a high priority for people from refugee backgrounds, as it is for many people.

This research explores how employment contributes to the successful resettlement of people from refugee backgrounds. ChangeMakers Refugee Forum carried out focus groups and interviews with 17 people in employment from 11 different refugee-background communities to provide greater depth of understanding to the following areas:

- what it means to have a job
- factors enabling people from refugee backgrounds to gain employment
- barriers and challenges to obtaining a job and meaningful employment.

This research was initially intended to document and celebrate the positive contributions that people from refugee backgrounds were making to Aotearoa New Zealand through their employment. As such, all of the people invited to participate in this research were employed. However, while our research documented numerous ‘success stories’, focus group and interview discussions also revealed a high incidence of underemployment or occupational downgrading among participants.

ChangeMakers’ research found that having a job contributed to participants’ self esteem and sense of making a contribution to society, challenged negative stereotypes, and provided the opportunity for participants to support their immediate family and build wider networks. Participants championed professional and community networks, volunteering and internships, and individualised job-seeking programmes in helping them

secure employment. Participants credited programmes such as Pathways to Employment (Refugee Services Aotearoa), ESOL Access and Assessment Specialist Service (MCLaSS), and the Skilled Migrant Programme (Victoria University of Wellington),¹ with assisting them in gaining employment that matched their skills and provided adequate remuneration.

While those who participated in individualised employment programmes unanimously reported positive experiences and good employment outcomes, the majority of participants who had *not* participated in these programmes were working in low-paid, part-time positions that at times did not adequately meet their living needs (including sending much-needed remittances to family overseas). This research also revealed a gendered dimension to ChangeMakers' findings: female participants were more likely to be underemployed or working in areas that were below their level of qualification or experience.

Participants also identified barriers to meaningful employment and to employment in general – ranging from a lack of English, Aotearoa New Zealand qualifications and work experience, through to discrimination. These findings are reflective of other research conducted both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally.²

This paper concludes with a number of recommendations on how to ensure greater numbers of people from refugee backgrounds can obtain meaningful employment. Specifically, ChangeMakers recommends:

¹ The individualised programmes highlighted in this research are those identified by research participants. It should be noted that is not an exhaustive list and other providers, such as English Language Partners, also support refugees into employment.

² Ollif, L. (2010). *What works: Employment strategies for refugee and humanitarian entrants*. Refugee Council of Australia: New South Wales; Department of Labour (2011). *The Bhutanese refugee resettlement story*. Retrieved 18/04/2012 from <http://www.dol.govt.nz/publications/research/bhutanese-refugee-resettlement/index.asp>.

- The provision of regionally coordinated, government funded, individualised employment programmes³ for working-aged and -able people from refugee backgrounds⁴ in Aotearoa New Zealand.
 - It is imperative that such programmes are allocated sufficient funding to ensure that marginalised groups *within* refugee-background communities, such as women and those who have been in Aotearoa New Zealand for longer periods of time, have equitable access to services.
- Long-term government commitment for the specific English language courses and training (e.g. English language in the workplace, Aotearoa New Zealand workplace orientation, etc.) needed to enable people from refugee backgrounds to secure meaningful employment and participate fully in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- The provision of more programmes that support ‘mainstream’ employment agencies to encourage/incentivise employers to intern skilled, work-ready job-seekers from refugee backgrounds.
- Initiatives to educate employers about the skills, experience, and ‘added value’ that people from refugee backgrounds can bring to their workplaces.
- A government-led, national diversity strategy that addresses discrimination and champions the New Zealand Government’s commitment to people who come to Aotearoa New Zealand as refugees, and celebrates the social and economic advantages of a diverse population and workplace.

³ Refugee Service Aotearoa’s Pathways to Employment programme implements a regional employment programme, yet is only funded to do so in Wellington and Hamilton; the success of this programme is documented in this report.

⁴ This includes UNHCR quota refugees, Convention refugees, and others who have come from refugee-like situations through the Refugee Family Support Category.

1. Introduction

Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work... and just and favourable remuneration.⁵

This right is also reflected in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the 1951 Refugee Convention (both of which have been ratified by the New Zealand Government), which emphasises that people who arrive in a new country as refugees have the same right to enjoy just and favourable work conditions as other nationals.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) handbook on refugee resettlement further highlights the importance of being economically self-sufficient as an essential feature of good resettlement:

Economic self-sufficiency is one of the most important factors in successful integration, with earning capacity influencing the ability to 'purchase' many of the other resources required to rebuild life in a new country, among them, housing, health care and education.⁶

The above human rights frameworks provide the premise of ChangeMakers' research, which gives voice to refugee-background perceptions of what it means to have a 'good' job. The objective of this research is to identify what has worked well for people in their search for meaningful employment (i.e. adequately remunerated, fulfilling employment that is commensurate with a person's skills and experience). The research also aims to determine the challenges experienced by people from refugee backgrounds in gaining

⁵ United Nations (1948). *The universal declaration of human rights*. Retrieved 2/4/12 from <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2002). *Refugee resettlement: An international handbook to guide reception and integration - Chapter 2.9 Building bridges to economic self-sufficiency*. Retrieved 2/4/12 from <http://www.unhcr.org/3d9861584.html>.

meaningful employment, and identify the barriers they've overcome – and in some cases are still overcoming – to obtain a 'good job'. This research builds on ChangeMakers' anecdotal knowledge about underemployment and unemployment among people from refugee backgrounds.

The findings of this research will be used to inform service delivery, contribute to refugee policy development, and increase understanding of how best to support people from refugee backgrounds into meaningful employment.

1.1 Background

Aotearoa New Zealand is one of 11 key countries that have been annually resettling refugees as part of the UNHCR Refugee Resettlement Programme since the 1980s.⁷ Over the last 20 years, Aotearoa New Zealand's annual resettlement quota has allowed for up to 750 arrivals per year. In addition to accepting refugees through the resettlement quota, Aotearoa New Zealand also accepts a small number of refugees who arrive in the country as asylum seekers; up to 300 additional people under the Refugee Family Support Category; and an unknown number of people through general immigration policy.⁸

Obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment is an important aspect of good settlement for people from refugee backgrounds.⁹ The UNHCR notes that:

As well as providing the means for economic stability, employment has a powerful influence on one's capacity to participate equally in the receiving society. Without employment, refugees risk becoming trapped in a cycle of social and economic marginalisation affecting not only them but possibly future generations.¹⁰

⁷ Quazi, A. (2009). *Quota refugees in New Zealand: Approvals and movements (1999 – 2008)*. Department of Labour: Wellington.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ollif, L. (2010). *What works: Employment strategies for refugee and humanitarian entrants*. Refugee Council of Australia: New South Wales.

¹⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2002). *Refugee resettlement: An international handbook to guide reception and Integration - Chapter 2.9 Building bridges to economic self-sufficiency*. Retrieved 2/4/12 from <http://www.unhcr.org/3d9861584.html>.

The New Zealand Government reflects this understanding and promotes employment as a key component of effective integration for people from refugee backgrounds resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand.¹¹

In Wellington, there are a number of initiatives currently being delivered to achieve positive employment outcomes for people from refugee backgrounds. These include: Pathways to Employment (Refugee Services Aotearoa), ESOL Access and Assessment Specialist Service (MCLaSS), the Skilled Migrant Programme (Victoria University of Wellington), and job brokering services at MCLaSS and English Language Partners.¹²

In 2010, the Department of Labour in consultation with other government agencies, NGOs, and refugee-background communities, began developing the National Refugee Resettlement Strategy, a cross-agency initiative to provide a more effective and integrated resettlement programme and to improve overall outcomes for new refugees arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand. The proposed strategy aims to improve self-sufficiency, participation, health and wellbeing, education, and housing outcomes for people from refugee backgrounds. The self-sufficiency aspect of the proposed strategy relates specifically to employment, with targets of reducing the proportion of working-age people from refugee backgrounds receiving an unemployment benefit, and increasing the proportion of those who are in paid employment.¹³

At the 2011 National Refugee Resettlement Forum, which focused on youth and employment, the then Minister of Immigration Hon Dr Jonathan Coleman stated ‘We want all refugees to achieve their potential in New Zealand, to succeed socially and economically.’

¹¹ Department of Labour (2011). *New Zealand refugee resettlement strategy*. Handout distributed at ChangeMakers’ Community Forum, May 2011.

¹² Funding for Pathways to Employment and ESOL Access and Assessment Specialist Service is not assured. Pathways to Employment is currently only funded to operate in Hamilton and Wellington.

¹³ Department of Labour (2011). *New Zealand refugee resettlement strategy*. Handout distributed at ChangeMakers’ Community Forum, May 2011.

However, research in Aotearoa New Zealand indicates that refugees are among the most marginalised groups in the labour market.¹⁴ In a 2009-10 Department of Labour survey of 512 former refugees, 51 percent of respondents reported government benefits as their main income source in the last 12 months.¹⁵ This compares to official unemployment rates in Aotearoa New Zealand during these periods of 6.1 percent¹⁶ and 6.4 percent¹⁷ respectively. Further, a recent study of 33 Bhutanese refugees resettled in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2009 found that only two of the 33 had gained employment.¹⁸

2. Methodology and research approach

The findings in this report were gathered from two focus groups and seven interviews that were conducted in December 2011 in Wellington. All participants were in paid employment when interviewed. Participants in this research were from 11 different refugee-background communities, with diverse employment and education backgrounds, working in an equally diverse range of sectors. Participants were identified from ChangeMakers' communities, by service provision organisations such as MCLaSS, and Refugee Services Aotearoa, as well as through snowball sampling (i.e. similar to using a 'word-of-mouth' method).

Research was undertaken using a strengths-based framework, where participants were invited to:

- define what a 'good job' meant to them
- describe the positive contributions they felt they were making to Aotearoa New Zealand by being employed

¹⁴ JR McKenzie Trust (2004). *The journey to work: Jobs for refugees*. JR McKenzie Trust: Auckland.

¹⁵ Searle, W., Gruner, A., and Duke T. (2011). 'New Land, New Life: Long term settlement of refugees in New Zealand (Preliminary report).' *Quota Refugees Ten Years on*. Department of Labour: Wellington.

¹⁶ Statistics New Zealand (2010). *Key findings in New Zealand's progress using a sustainable development approach*. Retrieved 21/03/12 from http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/environment/sustainable_development/key-findings-2010/meeting-needs-how-well-we-live.aspx#unemployment.

¹⁷ Statistics New Zealand (2010). *The employment rate and the Household Labour Force Survey (2010)*. Retrieved 21/03/12 from http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/income-and-work/employment_and_unemployment/employment-rate-article.aspx.

¹⁸ Department of Labour (2011). *The Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement Story*. Retrieved 18/04/2012 from <http://www.dol.govt.nz/publications/research/bhutanese-refugee-resettlement/index.asp>.

- share their experiences in describing the factors that have helped them secure work
- discuss the challenges of finding meaningful employment.

In addition, participants made recommendations on ways to improve employment outcomes for people from refugee backgrounds. This primary research was supplemented by a literature review on refugees and employment.

The research process was carried out using a consultative approach underpinned by ChangeMakers' *Standards for Engagement* (2008). ChangeMakers also followed its *Guidelines for Research with Refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand* (2010), which outlines core principles of research with refugee-background communities. These include: validating participants' experiences and worldviews; ensuring that participation is meaningful; and transparency on the part of the research team.

At the beginning of each focus group or interview, ChangeMakers' researchers obtained research consent, which included permission to record and take notes. Participants were informed that their comments would remain anonymous,¹⁹ that they had the right to 'pass' on commenting if they wished, and the right to leave at any time. Participants were provided with a koha and had their transport costs covered.

¹⁹ Places of work and other identifying speech have been replaced with [x] to protect participant identity.

3. Findings

The following section describes findings in each of the three research areas:

- What it means to have a job
- Factors enabling people from refugee backgrounds to gain employment
- Barriers and challenges to obtaining meaningful employment

Quotes are used to illustrate findings and convey the range of participants' experiences and perceptions. Reference is made to national and international research where relevant to the findings.

3.1 What it means to have a job

Focus groups and interviews began with discussions around the importance of having a job. Participants were asked to explain what having a 'good' job (i.e. meaningful employment) meant to them. They identified a range of factors, including:

- a sense of wellbeing
- economic independence
- the ability to support family
- feeling able to contribute to society
- the social benefits of having a job (e.g. improving English, understanding workplace culture, building networks, etc.).²⁰

3.1.1 A sense of wellbeing

When asked what it meant to have a 'good' job, participants highlighted benefits such as feeling 'useful' and improved self-esteem.

²⁰ For many of the participants, their current employment situations contrasted with their general descriptions of what it meant to have a 'good' job. This is discussed in **Section 3.3 Barriers and challenges: Underemployment, occupational downgrading, and unemployment** (pp 22-30).

Having a job means having more confidence.

It's probably the hope of all human beings to have some sort of useful work.

Participants unanimously agreed that having a good job provides people with a sense of meaning. Research with refugee and migrant communities in Australia has similarly shown that being in meaningful employment provides a feeling of belonging and helps people to establish a productive life in their new country.²¹

For me, the best job is a job that satisfies me, where I feel I am doing something good, where I feel I am contributing something.

A good job is if you are doing something that you like to do... related to your profession, to your work experience... that motivates you. It is not about money; money is just additional factor.

Having a job and earning some money means everything to me. In terms of morale, it's good to have a job; that means everything to me.

3.1.2 Economic independence

Most participants agreed that the sense of wellbeing associated with having a job relates to the economic independence that comes with receiving a regular wage or salary.

Having a job is very important because it keeps you out of WINZ [Work and Income] and also to be financially independent for yourself.

I'm working for my own satisfaction...to help myself to earn money.

I don't want to rely on any other sort of welfare if I can work.

²¹ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2008). *Real jobs: Employment for migrants and refugees in Australia*. Retrieved 10/01/12 from <http://www.eccv.org.au/library/doc/ECCVDiscussionPaper3-RealJobs.pdf>.

3.1.3 Ability to support family

Participants explained that financial independence provided them with the ability to support their families. Many participants were the sole breadwinner for their family living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

As a father, and as part of a family, it's extremely important to be able to provide for the necessities of our family and for our children, without having to depend on anyone else for those things.

My job is very important for my family because I am supporting my family economically to live, to cover expenses.

[Having a job] means paying my bills, paying my rent and all, and supporting my family.

You can manage to pay your bills, you can put some food on the table, then you can maybe also pay for the books for the kids or what they need for the school.

Participants also discussed efforts to stretch their income to support family members who are overseas, explaining that remittances sent 'back home' provided their families with much-needed income to pay for essential living expenses such as food, rent, and electricity. The importance of remittances has been highlighted at ChangeMakers' community forums, and in Aotearoa New Zealand and international research.²²

²² ChangeMakers Refugee Forum community forums: Wellington; Johnstone, T. & Kimani, M. (2010). *Wellington Refugee youth issues summary: Backgrounder for Wellington people working with refugee-background youth*. ChangeMakers Refugee Forum: Wellington;
Elliott, S. (1997). 'Like falling out of the sky': Communities in Collision. In Bell, C. (Ed). *Community issues in New Zealand*. Dunmore Press: Palmerston North;
Lindley, A. (2008). 'Conflict-induced migration and remittances: Exploring conceptual frameworks'. *Working paper series No. 47*. Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International Development: University of Oxford;
Canadian Council for Refugees (2011). *Refugee integration: Key concerns and areas for further research*. Retrieved 15/2/12 from <http://ccrweb.ca/files/refugee-integration-research-report.pdf>.

We all have families back home and we need to support them. Every month we have to send some money back home to support them. Pay for their rent, all their living and that.

Families that are left back home are part of us, so having a job also means to help them as well, because we live in a sharing community and that is how we've been raised.

3.1.4 Contribution

For many participants, being in employment directly increases their sense of being able to contribute to their new country.

It means whatever I do makes a difference somewhere, instead of sitting at home and not doing anything... [It gives me] a sense of contribution, being a part of the community and New Zealand society as a whole.

I am happy because I am making a difference; I am doing it because it is rewarding to me; I am happy because I have seen a lot of changes that I can make to the community, and to... those who are in need. My family, they are also very happy because they can see that I am helping other people and helping them at the same time. What I have done is also coming back to the family.

Participants described the range of ways they were able to contribute to Aotearoa New Zealand and what this meant to them. In addition to paying taxes, their contribution included using one's skills, experience and knowledge, for the good of their own communities and for New Zealanders in general.

When you help yourself, you are also helping your community.

At the end of the day you can see that you change people's lives because you are helping people.

It also means just contributing as well to society – contributing my skills and all that to the wider community.

I really want to take what I get out of it and actually use it in my community work.

3.1.5 The social benefits of having a job

Participants across all of the focus groups and interviews described how being in employment provided people with opportunities to improve their English, better understand Aotearoa New Zealand workplace culture, and build social skills and networks.

I learn new words, learn new skills every day, I learn new language, improve my English.

It helps me a lot, like getting along with other people...having new experience and learning other cultures.

I'm working with a very diverse [group of] people, with different backgrounds, so working with all these people in this environment is very good.

Participants also highlighted that these benefits were a two-way process. As well as increasing workplace diversity, participants spoke of the unique knowledge and skills that refugee-background employees bring to the workplace, which helps increase understanding of other cultures and offers opportunities for others to learn different ways of doing things.

People who are from refugee backgrounds who have work experience, different backgrounds and have worked with different cultures can bring so many skills, cultural competency, and also provide different approaches to [work] issues.

Participants in each of the two focus groups agreed that an important benefit of being in employment was increasing refugee visibility in the Aotearoa New Zealand labour market.

They commented that being able to demonstrate good work ethics and capabilities helped break down negative stereotypes associated with refugees. Participants saw themselves as assets to Aotearoa New Zealand, with the ability to participate fully and contribute to society, rather than a liability.

Refugees receive a lot of negative comments in New Zealand, [for example] that we don't contribute anything, so having a job is important to show your skills and your abilities.

[We can] show that people from refugee backgrounds can do the job. Given that we're from another country and people don't know us, this is a very useful way to become known to people, and once they get to know you, this is a way to open up opportunities for the future.

3.2 Factors enabling people from refugee backgrounds to gain employment

This section identifies methods used by participants to secure employment. Participants drew from their own experiences of looking for work, and shared their thoughts about job-seeking methods that have worked well for other people from refugee backgrounds.

A number of recurring themes arose in discussions about the various factors that have enabled people to find work. The following findings are divided into these themes:

- Studying
- Placements, internships, and volunteering
- Individualised job-seeking support
- Networking

3.2.1 Studying

Participants agreed that studying (which included learning English as well as gaining specific qualifications) was critical to finding any kind of work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

3.2.1.1 Learning English

Most participants noted that they had arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand with little or no English, reporting that their lack of English language skills presented a significant barrier to participation in the workforce. Almost all participants had taken (and in some cases were still taking) English classes in order to improve the possibility of securing employment (or improve their current employment situation).

When I start working here, I studied first. I studied English language for six months.

While learning English in the classroom is arguably an essential first step to finding work, practising English in the workplace was identified as a critical factor in ensuring that English language skills gained are relevant to people's work and everyday life.

I needed to learn English, study very hard, and then start working to practise the vocabulary, get my vocabulary up and get to know the [x] business in New Zealand. I'm learning valuable vocabulary for things and processes in the [x] industry, which of course I already know [in my language], but I need to know what it is in English.

3.2.1.2 Further education: Up-skilling and gaining New Zealand qualifications

Participants emphasised the importance of pursuing further studies and 'up-skilling' (which includes 'any further education and training activities undertaken to increase one's skills'²³) in order to secure meaningful employment.

I decided to do something new and study again... now I work as an [x], and I enjoy my work.

I got into this course offered by WINZ after I finished my studies to upgrade my skills. It was a Business Administration course, and it was really helpful. You learn how to go about looking for a job and they were helping us to look for a job while

²³ Satherley, P. & Lawes, E. (2008). *The adult literacy and life skills (ALL) survey: Gender, ethnicity and literacy*. Research Division, Ministry of Education: Wellington. Retrieved 1/3/12 from <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/literacy/29875/6>.

we're learning. It was my first admin course, and that is how I got the skills for this job.

Of the 17 participants, five have gained New Zealand qualifications – from certificates and diplomas, through to a master's degree – while five others were either enrolled in undergraduate studies and/or planning to undertake studies in 2012.

After I studied Travel and Tourism, I had another course, Business Administration and Computing and I got the certificates for both.

You have to have four certificates...Lower Hutt, Upper Hutt, Porirua, Wellington... When you finish, you have to get your passenger service [certificate]. If you finish your passenger service, you have to get your area knowledge [certificate]... If you finish these courses... you have to have good knowledge and good skills...

I did Business Studies majoring in International Business, and then I did Masters in Business Psychology...I knew I was always going to university and study...

3.2.2 Placements, internships, and volunteering

Many participants described how placements, internships, or volunteering experiences had provided them with the tools to apply their skills and experiences within the Aotearoa New Zealand work environment, which in turn led to their success securing a job.

It was a starting point for me... to allow me to demonstrate those skills... and they gave me a chance. After I finished my internship I was offered a job.

I had to do work experience training once a week... and when I finished my studying, the centre asked me to work there as a reliever.

[People from refugee backgrounds] need to do volunteering or internships. This will increase their chances of getting a job. Before I got this job, I worked in a volunteering role..... I was very happy when I got that opportunity.

For some participants, volunteering had provided them and others from communities with the opportunity to 'help out', learn new skills, and gain Aotearoa New Zealand work experience.

I know 10 or 12 people who are doing volunteer work from the [x] community. They're doing it because they have no other way of showing people what they can do or what they know. And it's also a great way for people to practise their English and get to know other people.

I wasn't expecting to get a job the same as my qualification [because] English is difficult, [so] at the moment I'm volunteering with [x] once a week, and really enjoying it.

Volunteering was also seen as a way of establishing networks and connecting with others working in a specific sector.

First of all, the experience I'm gaining is very useful skill to have and secondly, it's a way of getting myself known within this work.

Participants acknowledged that for many newly arrived people from refugee backgrounds, there are limited professional networking opportunities. They recommended volunteering as a way to help people meet other New Zealanders and demonstrate their skills.

Volunteering is important because it will open opportunities, so people from refugee backgrounds can show their talents and skills, and gain trust and acceptance to widen their chances of getting a job.

3.2.3 Individualised job-seeking support

Participants agreed that individualised job-seeking support was a critical factor in gaining meaningful employment. Participants spoke positively about programmes they had had direct experience with. These were:

- Pathways to Employment (Refugee Services Aotearoa)
- ESOL Access and Assessment Specialist Service (MCLaSS)
- and the Skilled Migrant Programme (Victoria University of Wellington), which included working with the employment agency The Johnson Group.

I was lucky to take the Skilled Migrant course at Victoria University, which was six weeks of class and six weeks of internship. I [was] there one and a half months and [then] I was offered a job.

When I was told about the [Pathways] project, I said 'yes absolutely I was interested in it.' It seemed to me to be the easiest way to find some sort of work.

The Johnson Group worked with ESOL Access and Assessment Specialist Service to identify companies that would intern people from refugee backgrounds.

Of the 17 participants, only three people had participated in these employment initiatives but all three were working in areas that reflected their prior work experience, skills, and training. These participants observed that by receiving individualised support from job brokers and others, they had been able to target their job-seeking efforts towards their specific skills. They noted that this support assisted them in identifying areas where they needed to up-skill prior to applying for jobs similar to those they'd had in their countries of origin. Research in Australia has similarly found that specialist refugee employment services significantly improve refugee participation in the workforce.²⁴

²⁴ Ollif, L. (2010). *What works: Employment strategies for refugee and humanitarian entrants*. Refugee Council of Australia: New South Wales.

The most important thing which has helped me find a job very quickly was... everything started from MCLaSS.

It would have been very hard for me to find this work without Pathways support.

Participants endorsed the recently implemented initiative that Refugee Services Aotearoa had developed, which includes a focus on employment goals and career planning support while people are at Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre.²⁵

3.2.4 Networking

Many participants agreed that networking was a valuable means of gaining employment. Some described instances where their connections with community members and friends led to employment opportunities.

My cousin used to work at [x]. He asked me to come and apply for a job. ... I applied and then I got the job.

I found this job through a friend. They told me that a [x] was needed on Wednesdays, are you able to help.

Whenever there's a job there, you take it back to the community, so that people can apply for the job.

Other participants described how professional networking – i.e. making contacts through internships and volunteers – led to learning about upcoming jobs and knowing who to contact for work opportunities.

²⁵ Every working-aged refugee leaves Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre with a Comprehensive Resettlement Plan (CRP). This initiative began in July 2011. Unfortunately Refugee Services Aotearoa is only funded to support the achievement of the employment component of CRP in Wellington and Hamilton.

I joined [x] as an intern, then I met so many people and then heard about some job opportunities. One of them was this one at [x]. I applied, I went through the interview process, then was selected.

Networking was a deciding factor, what got me this job was networks.

3.3 Barriers and challenges: Underemployment, occupational downgrading & unemployment

While participants identified enabling factors that have helped them secure employment, they also identified a number of barriers and challenges including:

- English language difficulties
- lack of Aotearoa New Zealand work experience
- lack of/limited recognition of overseas qualifications
- limited networks, lack of understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand workplace culture and systems
- underemployment and occupational downgrading
- discrimination

3.3.1 English language difficulties

Having limited English language skills can present a significant challenge for people from refugee backgrounds, whether in terms of finding work or gaining access to health and education services.²⁶ Many participants reiterated this issue.

There are many people from many communities who have many skills to offer. The problem is the language!

²⁶ ChangeMakers Refugee Forum (2011). *Barriers to achieving and maintaining good health outcomes in refugee-background communities*; ChangeMakers Refugee Forum: Wellington; Johnstone, T. & Kimani, M. (2010). *Wellington Refugee youth issues summary: Backgrounder for Wellington people working with refugee-background youth*. ChangeMakers Refugee Forum: Wellington.

A lot of people are struggling. They can't even speak English after 15 years here, can't get a job. Then WINZ pressures you to look for a job. How can they get a job, they have nothing!

Participants discussed how their initial lack of English language – and in some cases, their ongoing struggles to learn English – has limited their ability to interact with other New Zealanders, and reduced their ability to demonstrate their skills and experience.

Language is still and always is an issue: you never really feel comfortable enough to talk in front of people, to be louder – you might be like, 'did I say that right, or did I say something wrong?'

It is many years of hard slog and hard study to get your language skills to a level where you're not disadvantaged by the language.

The biggest thing as an adult here in New Zealand is the frustration of not being able to explain what I know and what I want.

Focus group discussions revealed a direct correlation between participants' English language proficiency and the type of work they were currently employed in; there was a high level of underemployment and occupational downgrading among those who were still struggling with their English. Participants with limited English were employed in low-skilled jobs such as cleaning, driving, and construction, despite many holding qualifications and/or having held higher-paid or higher-skilled jobs in their countries of origin and/or refugee camps.

One of the big problems for me is having a basic level of English only, not a sufficiently good level to be able to work efficiently.

English is very hard to communicate. We can do manual jobs, but English is very hard for us.

When I studied, I studied in another language. So it's really difficult for me... because I've to go to do English first... I need to do more other things instead of going straight into a course.

3.3.2 Lack of Aotearoa New Zealand work experience

The challenges of not having Aotearoa New Zealand work experience and its impacts on employment prospects for people from refugee backgrounds has been raised at numerous ChangeMakers community forums, as well as nationally (e.g. at the National Refugee Resettlement Forums).²⁷

Participants re-affirmed this barrier, unanimously describing their frustration with what they perceived as an over-emphasis on a need for Aotearoa New Zealand work experience outweighed any relevant work experience they had in other countries.

You lack so many experiences in New Zealand; that is main factor. Many employers, they see your professional history, your work experience... and then many of them say that you don't have New Zealand experience.

I have been enrolled with so many agencies. ...but there was no luck, and they were always asking for experience. Not having that [local] experience is quite hard.

If you don't have some New Zealand experience related to [your work] and some background, you can't even think about getting a job.

Participants' attempts to mitigate their lack of local experience through volunteering have been mixed. One participant pointed out that they couldn't even find unpaid work (in exchange for Aotearoa New Zealand work experience), because employers were reluctant to be perceived as exploitative.

²⁷ Nam, B. & Ward, R. (2006). *Refugee and migrant needs: An annotated bibliography of research and consultations*. RMS Refugee Resettlement: Wellington.

There was a lot of resistance; I said I would do it for free, and I was told 'We don't want you to work for free, we don't want to exploit you.' You know, you are not exploiting me, because I am getting the experience!

3.3.3 Lack of/limited recognition of overseas qualifications

Along with a lack of local work experience, participants also described the difficulty of contending with a lack of New Zealand-recognised qualifications.

Participants who had arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand with specific – and sometimes extensive – skills and training expressed their frustration with not having their qualifications from their home countries recognised.

Imagine you were working on something 10-11 years, you thought [your qualifications were] valuable, and then you are told it is nothing....you have to start from zero. You are morally and emotionally just getting low.

If you lose your confidence and self esteem, it is very hard to get back into anything.

Many participants discussed the difficulties inherent in re-qualifying in Aotearoa New Zealand, describing the impact of realising that they had little chance of finding a route back into their profession and securing a comparable job in Aotearoa New Zealand. Participants' comments reflect international findings on refugees entering the workforce. Research from Australia and the U.K. reveals the challenges refugees face in re-qualifying for work, and the impact of this on individuals and their communities (i.e. lower-paying and/or intermittent employment options.)²⁸

²⁸ Williams, R. (2008). *The refugee job placement project: Breaking down the barriers to employment for refugees in West Yorkshire*. The back to work company. Retrieved 20/3/12 from <http://www.thebacktoworkcompany.com/RJPP%20-%20WLR1%20Conference%20July%2006.pdf>; Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2008). *Real jobs: Employment for migrants and refugees in Australia*. Retrieved 10/01/12 from <http://www.eccv.org.au/library/doc/ECCVDiscussionPaper3-RealJobs.pdf>.

To practice in this field [in New Zealand] I need to be registered. That is difficult and challenging and takes a long time. So I've got to look for a different job.

I have friends who enrolled at Weltec, they are looking at studying there until they have got the fourth level... if you add it all you're talking about seven or so years [of study]. It is great frustration, you want to put in all this effort and then all of a sudden you're a pensioner, you know? You haven't had chance to work!

3.3.4 Underemployment and occupational downgrading²⁹

Although all of the participants for the focus groups and interviews were employed, interviews and focus groups revealed high levels of underemployment and occupational downgrading. Many of the concerns articulated by participants related to the disadvantages of underemployment and occupational downgrading rather than unemployment.

While ChangeMakers' findings are based on a relatively small number of participants, numerous larger studies from Australia have documented similar findings. The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria found that many people from refugee and migrant backgrounds 'end up working in areas outside of their profession or at a disproportionately low level.'³⁰ A report by the Refugee Council of Australia found that while people from refugee backgrounds may be highly motivated to take up jobs, they are 'overrepresented among the ranks of underemployed, lowly-paid, low-skilled, precariously employed and casualised members of the labour force.'³¹

²⁹ Underemployment is when a person is employed but the hours may be casual or insufficient to meet their living costs. Occupational downgrading is when a person is employed in an area that is below their level of skill and/or experience. Definition from Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria. (2008). *Real jobs: Employment for migrant and refugees in Australia*. Retrieved 10/01/12 from <http://www.eccv.org.au/library/doc/ECCVDiscussionPaper3-RealJobs.pdf>.

³⁰ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2008). *Real jobs: Employment for migrants and refugees in Australia*. Retrieved 10/01/12 from <http://www.eccv.org.au/library/doc/ECCVDiscussionPaper3-RealJobs.pdf>.

³¹ Ollif, L. (2010). *What works: Employment strategies for refugee and humanitarian entrants*. Refugee Council of Australia: New South Wales.

Of the 17 people participating in ChangeMakers’s research, 10 participants (over half) were in low-paying work (including part-time and shift work) that either did not reflect their previous work experience or training, or was a less-skilled, lower-paid version of highly-skilled jobs held in their home countries (e.g. a qualified teacher now working as a teacher aide).³² Seven people stated that they were in jobs that were relevant to their skills. Of those, only three participants were in jobs that directly built on their previous work experience or education.

There is also a gendered dimension to these findings: the majority of those participants who had not received individualised employment support *and* were employed in low-paid casual work (e.g. cleaning, rest home care) were women.

Women from refugee backgrounds in Australia have also been found to be particularly vulnerable to underemployment and occupational downgrading as a result of factors such as English language challenges, their roles as primary carers, discrimination (e.g. perceptions of women wearing hijab), and difficulties accessing transport.³³ The UNHCR has highlighted the ‘compounding effects of discrimination’ that women from refugee backgrounds experience on the grounds of their gender, age, background and ability, calling for additional resources to support women’s transition to paid employment, including more intensive job placement support.³⁴

Most participants – even those who were now in work that reflected their prior skills and experience – described the frustration they’d initially experienced upon realising that they would not be working at the same level as in their home country.

...it was not a job; they were expecting me to talk to [x] to see if they wanted water or a newspaper. I felt like I wasn’t contributing anything – I was wasting my time.

³² Of these ten participants, five were either undertaking further training or planning to study in 2012.

³³ Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria (2008). *Real jobs: Employment for migrants and refugees in Australia*. Retrieved 10/01/12 from <http://www.eccv.org.au/library/doc/ECCVDiscussionPaper3-RealJobs.pdf>.

³⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2002). *Refugee resettlement: An international handbook to guide reception and integration – Chapter 3.2: Taking account of gender*. Retrieved 10/01/12 from <http://www.unhcr.org/3d98627f4.html>.

I did a Masters in [x] - probably sent at least 100-150 applications... yeah, but just recently I ended up doing fruit picking. Just on the unemployment as well.

I went to university for five, eight years of high level study and I'm going to do [manual labour] now?

In addition to the disappointment of not being able to work in a job that corresponded with their prior skills and qualifications, participants described the financial stress that comes with working part-time and/or in low-paying jobs. Although participants all agreed that they preferred to work rather than be unemployed, many participants pointed out that the reality of employment did not always equate with economic independence.

For my emotional wellbeing, yes, it's helpful for me but in terms of economical, it's not very helpful at all, because it comes out of my benefit and there's not a lot of difference there.

This is the way of living here – I just need to find other methods to support my family. If the money is not enough, I just pay my rent, electricity; pay whatever I need to pay.

I grow my garden, and I just buy some things like semolina, butter, or something. I just cook and then give to my kids... and then I don't have anything, and I am not going to street just begging for food... This is how we manage in this country, it's really tough now.

Low wages and a reliance on sporadic or shift work meant that, despite being aware of their responsibility to provide financial support to family overseas, participants were unable to send necessary remittances. Research in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally has highlighted the ongoing expectation of people from refugee

backgrounds to send money 'back home'.³⁵ Participants reiterated this, describing the pressure to send funds to their families overseas despite themselves struggling to meet the cost of living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

People calling you all the time, talking about what they are going through and you have to send some money.

The situation has changed – it's really hard; for three years, I can't send money back.

It is really hard to send money back home because what I earn is not even enough for me here now.

Because I work part time, so sometimes it's really hard for me, if I pay bills, there's not enough money to send overseas. So this is just the problem, is the employment.

3.3.5 Limited networks, lack of understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand workplace culture and systems

Participants discussed the challenges of using conventional job-seeking methods in Aotearoa New Zealand, explaining how unfamiliar job-seeking processes made it harder for them to find work that was commensurate with their skills and qualifications.

Not knowing the New Zealand system or how to really start looking for a job itself is a barrier.

³⁵ Johnstone, T. & Kimani, M. (2010). *Wellington refugee youth issues summary: Backgrounder for Wellington people working with refugee-background youth*. ChangeMakers Refugee Forum: Wellington; Canadian Council for Refugees (2011) *Refugee Integration: Key concerns and areas for further research*. Retrieved 15/2/12 from <http://ccrweb.ca/files/refugee-integration-research-report.pdf>;
Lindley, A. (2008). 'Conflict-induced migration and remittances: Exploring conceptual frameworks'. *Working Paper Series No. 47*. Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International Development: University of Oxford;
McBeth, P. (2009) *Weak NZ dollar cuts refugee remittances, adds to pressure*. BusinessWire. Retrieved 10/1/12 from <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/NM0903/S00001/weak-nz-dollar-cuts-refugee-remittances.htm>.

You don't know the New Zealand system, the workplace culture, the policies; you lack so many experiences in New Zealand.

Participants recognised that their relatively new status as New Zealanders meant that outside of their own communities, they had limited networking opportunities to help secure jobs.

There must be someone from here who can say something about you and has to recommend you.

3.3.6 Discrimination

During discussions about the difficulty of finding work, some participants described examples where they felt that they had been discriminated against by potential employers. Employment research in Australia revealed similar experiences of discrimination.³⁶

I applied for jobs, I don't know how many, and I have been shortlisted, after that they have declined my application and I have not even attended the interview. I don't know how to fit that, is it racism or discrimination?

They didn't look past my name.

I didn't even get normal administration jobs when I finished my qualifications, and I had work experience since I was 16. That's when I really, really started realising there was discrimination.

³⁶ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2008). *Real jobs: Employment for migrant and refugees in Australia*. Retrieved 10/01/12 from <http://www.eccv.org.au/library/doc/ECCVDiscussionPaper3-RealJobs.pdf>.

There is a place I applied for that I really, really wanted to work for, and I could tick all the boxes there. I didn't even get an interview! I went straight back to them and

I asked them specific questions about everything, even the presentation of my application, my CV. And I had a reply: 'Well, we are looking for people that had this experience, these skills and these qualifications.' And I said, 'As you saw in my cover letter and my CV, I have that experience, that work experience – even more than what they asked for!

4. Conclusions

The most important thing for me is that I have a job that is connected to my background and experience – it's something that I was not expecting to get that easily. That's the main thing for me – to get a job that I know something about, and which can help me to pursue my career in the future as well.

The importance of securing stable, adequately remunerated, meaningful employment has been well documented as a major factor in achieving successful refugee resettlement outcomes. This research has highlighted a number of positive factors that impact on the individual, their family members both here and overseas, and the wider community when people from refugee backgrounds obtain employment.

Securing employment for research participants resulted in economic independence, being able to support their immediate family, increased their self esteem, and a sense of making a contribution. Employment gave participants an opportunity to challenge negative stereotypes, build wider networks, improve their English language skills, and add value to the workplace. Participants saw themselves as assets to Aotearoa New Zealand, with the ability to participate fully and contribute to society.

Participants agreed that making a meaningful contribution in the Aotearoa New Zealand labour market enabled them to increase the standard of living for themselves and their families overseas, develop social networks, and improve their English language skills.

While participants' experiences of employment were unique, there were many common elements that had supported people to gain meaningful employment. Participants stated that learning English was a critical factor to getting a job, as was gaining New Zealand qualifications and work experience. Over half of the participants had either gained New Zealand qualifications or were in the process of doing so. Others highlighted the importance of internships, work placements, and volunteering as a mechanism to increase experience in the Aotearoa New Zealand work environment and demonstrate their skills to potential employers.

Participants also identified the importance of networks in securing a job. While building networks among their own community led to employment for many participants, those who had wider community and professional networks had achieved higher-paid and higher-skilled work than their counterparts.

Participants who had been involved in the ESOL Access and Assessment Specialist Service and Pathways to Employment, affirmed that individualised employment programmes had been critical to their success of securing meaningful employment. They commented that these initiatives had helped them identify areas where they needed to up-skill, resulting in them gaining employment that reflected their prior work experience, skills and training. The importance of individualised employment programmes reflects international refugee employment research that highlights such programmes as one of the most effective ways of supporting people from refugee backgrounds to secure meaningful work.

Findings also highlighted the success of integrating refugee-background job-seeking efforts with mainstream agencies, such as the Johnson Group who helped identify intern opportunities that fostered professional networks and provided valuable work experience. This type of initiative also brought employers' attention to the skilled

contributions that people from refugee backgrounds can make to the workplace. This last aspect should not be overlooked. Research from the UK found that ‘employers are key to the successful employment and integration of refugees, and are notoriously difficult to engage.’³⁷ Programmes such as the Skilled Migrant Programme were seen as essential by participants, owing to their workplace-ready support and internship component, as well as courses that built specific skills such as Work and Income’s Business Administration and Computing courses.

Many of the barriers to employment and challenges of securing meaningful employment were also shared by participants. These included the converse of factors that helped participants gain employment, such as English language difficulties, lack of Aotearoa New Zealand networks, work experience and knowledge about how to go about looking for a job, and the limited recognition by Aotearoa New Zealand employers of overseas qualifications and experience. Many participants felt they had the necessary skills and qualifications for employment opportunities but were not offered interviews because of discrimination.

This research has highlighted a significant issue: underemployment and occupational downgrading. Again, this finding has also been reflected in international research. Participants felt that the Aotearoa New Zealand labour market was yet to recognise the contribution that people from refugee backgrounds are able to make to Aotearoa New Zealand workplaces. Many participants stated that they were not employed to their full potential: less than half were in employment that matched their work experience and/or training. While all participants were grateful to have a job, many were frustrated by the realisation that they would not be employed at the same level as in their home country.

Participants cited underemployment as a key factor affecting their quality of life. More than one participant described their struggle with meeting their basic needs (i.e. food, electricity, rent). In addition to meeting these basic needs, one of the main challenges of

³⁷ Williams, R. (2008). *The refugee job placement project: Breaking down the barriers to employment for refugees in West Yorkshire*. The back to work company. Retrieved 20/3/12 from <http://www.thebacktoworkcompany.com/RJPP%20-%20WLR%20Conference%20July%2006.pdf>

underemployment related to remittances. Participants reiterated how important it was for them to support family members living abroad; many expressed their distress that their sporadic and/or part-time, low-paid job meant they had limited income to do so.

Both women and people who have been in Aotearoa New Zealand for a significant amount of time are particularly vulnerable to underemployment and unemployment, and need to be included in initiatives to improve refugee employment prospects. Findings from this research revealed a gendered dimension to underemployment: female participants were more likely to be underemployed or working in areas that were below their level of qualification or experience. This suggests that women from refugee backgrounds are disadvantaged by both their gender and their refugee backgrounds. While not discussed in these focus groups, research from the Department of Labour has shown that obtaining employment also remains a concern for those who came to Aotearoa New Zealand as refugees more than 10 years ago.³⁸

It should be noted that ChangeMakers' findings reflect an issue affecting New Zealanders across the country: former industrial advocate and now principal of the Wellington industrial law firm Cullen Law, Peter Cullen, noted that 'across the board, I see more workers on the minimum wage or very low wages than we've ever had.'³⁹ The current pressures within the labour market doubly burden people from refugee backgrounds, compounding the barriers that are already preventing them from finding meaningful work.

³⁸ A survey of 512 people from refugee backgrounds who have lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for 10 years or more showed that 51 percent reported government benefits as their main income source in the last 12 months, indicating that those who have lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for longer periods of time may still be in need of targeted assistance. (Searle, W., Gruner, A, and Duke T. (2011). 'New land, new life: Long term settlement of refugees in New Zealand (Preliminary report).' *Quota refugees ten years on*. Department of Labour: Wellington).

³⁹ Peter Cullen, Radio New Zealand News, 1/3/12.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Participants' recommendations

Participants made a number of suggestions on how employment outcomes for people from refugee backgrounds could be improved. They called for greater recognition of the skills and experience that people from refugee backgrounds bring to Aotearoa New Zealand.

New Zealand can get better investment by offering refugee-background people with skills the opportunities to use their skills and show what they can do... [They would] become productive members of society much faster than they would otherwise.

Participants were unanimous in their recommendation of increased provision for English language classes as an important step towards improving employment opportunities.

Number one is the English language.

While participants championed the successes of individualised employment initiatives, many felt that this type of service needed to be more broadly available, and ideally, nationally coordinated. Participants expressed their concern that current programmes did not reach everyone, and the lack of coordination meant greater risk of gaps and duplication among agencies.

There is need for a more coordinated approach... Seems so many people are opening employment agencies here and there, and...you are losing the whole focus.

Participants also had suggestions for people from refugee backgrounds on how to improve their employment prospects. Participants emphasised the importance of taking the initiative to learn English, building networks outside of their respective communities

through volunteering, and participating in programmes that educated people from refugee backgrounds about the Aotearoa New Zealand workplace culture.

[People from refugee backgrounds] need to learn English language first. Doing volunteering and getting involved with communities to get experience is also important.

5.2 ChangeMakers' recommendations

This research highlights the need for targeted interventions to ensure that people from refugee backgrounds can participate fully in Aotearoa New Zealand and make the positive contribution that they are capable of and have a strong desire to make. Securing employment is one important component of successful resettlement. To achieve this, ChangeMakers' recommends:

- The provision of regionally coordinated, government funded, individualised employment programmes⁴⁰ for working-aged and -able people from refugee backgrounds⁴¹ in Aotearoa New Zealand.
 - It is imperative that such programmes are allocated sufficient funding to ensure that marginalised groups *within* refugee-background communities, such as women and those who have been in Aotearoa New Zealand for longer periods of time, have equitable access to services.
- Long-term government commitment for the specific English language courses and training (e.g. English language in the workplace, Aotearoa New Zealand workplace orientation, etc.) needed to enable people from refugee backgrounds to secure meaningful employment and participate fully in Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁴⁰Refugee Service Aotearoa's Pathways to Employment programme implements a regional employment programme, yet is only funded to do so in Wellington and Hamilton.

⁴¹This includes UNHCR quota refugees, Convention refugees, and others who have come from refugee-like situations through the Refugee Family Support Category.

- The provision of more programmes that support ‘mainstream’ employment agencies to encourage/incentivise employers to intern skilled, work-ready job-seekers from refugee backgrounds.
- Initiatives to educate employers about the skills, experience, and ‘added value’ that people from refugee backgrounds can bring to their workplaces.
- A government-led, national diversity strategy that addresses discrimination and champions the New Zealand Government’s commitment to people who come to Aotearoa New Zealand as refugees, and celebrates the social and economic advantages of a diverse population and workplace.

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ChangeMakers Refugee Forum

We are a rights based, non government organisation representing over 14 refugee-background communities living in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Our vision:

New Zealanders from refugee backgrounds participating fully in New Zealand life.

To achieve our vision we carry out community development, research, and advocacy.
For more information go to:

www.crf.org.nz

