

Rebuilding lives: Interviewing refugee background people in Christchurch three years after the earthquakes

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Through the frosted glass pane of the 1940s-era front door we saw his shadow approaching, slowly and with a slightly uneven gait. “Namaste, come in,” M. welcomed us with a broad smile, revealing teeth stained pink-red by decades of betel nut. He pushed open the door and stood aside to let us pass, then followed us into a sitting room cluttered with children’s toys. Peeling from the walls were brightly coloured posters of Buddha, as well as a couple of carefully-composed family portraits in gaudy frames. M.’s wife shyly greeted us, then left to prepare cups of sweet, milky *chiya*.

We had come to visit M. for an interview. He was one of several central characters in a documentary we were making about the contribution of refugee background people to the rebuild and recovery of the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, large parts of which had been destroyed by an earthquake swarm in 2010-11. The documentary’s primary intention was to increase the visibility of refugees in the city, and to do so in a highly positive way. The post-earthquake rebuild and recovery had seemed a powerful and unique lens through which to promote the success stories of refugee background people, and to demonstrate their dedication to and love for the city which they now consider home. We wanted to show that refugee background people should not be portrayed or perceived of as merely as victims, but as survivors with unique skills and experiences, many of whom are driven by a sincere eagerness to give back to their new community.

We had wanted to interview M. because of his work following the especially devastating 22 February 2011 earthquake when, over the course of a few days, he and a community leader had visited the houses of hundreds of refugee families. The two men had operated in incredibly difficult conditions, with movement restricted by severely damaged roads and omnipresent liquefaction (a silt-like substance which was forced from beneath the ground by the shaking). Further to the physical dangers were the challenges of intermittent or non-existent electricity and damaged water and sewerage pipes.

In visiting the families, the two men were able firstly to check-up on the wellbeing of refugee background people living in the city. Armed with this knowledge, they organised volunteers to help clean up the pervasive liquefaction and broken glass, or assisted people to move from unsafe housing to stay with relatives or friends. The exercise, secondly, provided the families with much-valued practical aid. The men dispensed essential post-disaster survival items such as hand sanitizer and passed on any information they had gathered from government, health or security personnel. In this way, the men

were able to help people who were often cut-off from mainstream channels of assistance by limited physical mobility, limited access to media, and limited English language knowledge. By their very presence, the men were also able to offer emotional comfort and act as counsellors when needed.

Yet M.'s altruistic actions in the aftermath of the disaster constitute just one fragment of a compelling life narrative which spans decades and continents. Presented with the opportunity to tell his story to two avid listeners, M. talked of spending his late teens in confinement for allegedly inciting political agitation at school, the tough 17 years in a refugee camp, the excitement of being selected to come to New Zealand and of starting a new life in Christchurch. His leg, swollen from abuse in prison, still pains him, but at least in New Zealand he can receive treatment for it. His sons can go to school and speak their native language without the threat of reprisal. He has, in fact, rebuilt his life here, much like he and other refugee background people have been rebuilding their devastated city.

M.'s gratitude to New Zealand was evident as he spoke, just as it was for the other refugee background people we interviewed. Although they retained strong emotional connections to their native countries, each interviewee spoke with passion about his or her new home. Stronger even than their connections to New Zealand, however, were undoubtedly their connections to Christchurch, the resettlement city which they had been arbitrarily designated and in which they had since made their lives.

Mingled with sadness for the physical loss of the city and recognition of the hardships which many residents continue to face, the interviewees expressed an intense and humbling dedication to rebuilding Christchurch. The act of rebuilding - whether social or physical - was one tangible way they could demonstrate their dedication to and gratitude for the place they now consider their home. Rather than dwell on the horror and the fear, or even the incessant challenges of living in a post-disaster environment, interviewees chose to look forward to the Christchurch of the future, of which they hoped to be an integral part.

The preference of refugee background people for forward-looking optimism around the Christchurch rebuild supports anecdotal evidence which suggests that these communities are coping relatively well with the trauma engendered by the earthquakes. Hypotheses to explain this phenomenon cite refugees' inner strength, spirituality and resourcefulness (by virtue of being a refugee, they have already lived through and survived highly traumatic events) and the strong support networks already in place amongst refugee background communities. It would appear that for many refugee background people, the experience of living through a natural disaster after having endured, survived and escaped from the man-made disasters of their home countries has not re-traumatised them. Rather, the experience has made them determined to demonstrate their commitment to the city, which can be tangibly demonstrated through the act of rebuilding. In this way, the Christchurch earthquakes,

despite the fear, uncertainty and prolonged difficulty they have undoubtedly engendered, have also provided refugee background people with a unique opportunity to prove both their skills and their passion for the city. Just as Christchurch provided them with the opportunity to rebuild their lives, so they are now devoted to rebuilding Christchurch.