

A PLACE FOR THE DISPLACED: A CONSIDERATION OF THE TYPES OF SERVICES  
CARIBBEAN LIBRARIES SHOULD PROVIDE TO REFUGEES

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**Abstract**

*Many libraries in the Caribbean may have considered amenities for short stay users... tourists, visitors and the odd researcher, but many may not have considered the plight of the stateless<sup>∞</sup> as a user group in Caribbean libraries. With the prevalence of disasters in the region – Hurricane Ivan as the most recent and devastating example – the impact of migratory workers that the CSME will bring and the impending issuance of national refugee laws in the region; it is but a matter of time before regional libraries become a refuge for the refugee. This paper will outline (1) current trends globally and regionally and suggest why it is important not to deny the human rights of this so far undocumented user group in the Caribbean and (2) ways in which refugees can be accommodated by libraries. Now, more than ever, libraries in the region should consider the types of services that should be provided to refugees since current trends indicate that this user group will most likely expand and have an impact on library services in the not to distant future.*

**Keywords**

CARIBBEAN AREA; LIBRARY SERVICES; REFUGEES; INFORMATION SERVICES;  
LIBRARY COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT; LIBRARY PLANNING; OUTREACH  
PROGRAMS; USER NEEDS (INFORMATION)

**Introduction**

The connection between refugees and libraries is oft ignored in librarianship in the developing world, especially for libraries in the Caribbean region, many have encountered the odd refugee, but would not have documented the experience. This paper explores the current global scenario and offers some suggestions in treating with this under-served library patron.

**Who is a refugee?**

A refugee is a person who is forced to cross international borders due to circumstances beyond his or her control; be it environmental, political and civil. They differ from immigrants or even

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<sup>∞</sup> In this paper, stateless, refugee and asylum seeker are used interchangeably.

deportees, in that they flee by force not by choice. No person chooses to be a refugee, but for persons who are forced to become refugees, their rights are preserved in article 14(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; *Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.*<sup>1</sup> According to the Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as someone who: *has a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; is outside of the country they belong or currently reside in, and; is unable or unwilling to return home for fear of persecution.*<sup>2</sup> In the Latin American and Caribbean region, there are approximately 11,000 refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>3</sup> Though refugee populations are usually characterized as women and children, in this region, ‘young male asylum seekers constitute a higher proportion of those of concern to the UNHCR’ [United Nations High Commission for Refugees].<sup>4</sup>

### **Global scenario**

Since 11 September 2001, the developed world – which comprises countries that have systems in place to process and accept refugees, instituted restrictive acceptance policies against asylum seekers. Some restrictions are accompanied by xenophobic overtures to refugees from the developing world, especially those of Middle Eastern origin. Additionally, with the amalgamation of the European states, individual state laws regarding asylum seekers have been streamlined – thereby adjusting previously held national criteria and restricting the numbers of asylum seekers who would have normally been accepted. As a result, new places of resettlement are being investigated.

Of note, 10% of the refugees of the world originate from the Latin American and Caribbean region. That is, one in every ten persons from this region is knocking on another states’ door looking for refuge. Also, the plight of the refugee is a media feature that not only exists in North America, Africa, the Middle or Far East but in the Caribbean Sea from a pirogue off the coast of

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<sup>1</sup> UN. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 14. <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>.

<sup>2</sup> UN. Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees. [<http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>] November 2005.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR. Summary of the strategic oral presentation of UNHCR’s operation in the Americas, 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the standing committee. 5-7 March 2002, 5.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR. State of the Worlds Refugee Report: human displacement in the new millennium. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Barbados, Haiti or Cuba. Stories about human trafficking, internally displaced persons and asylum seekers are front-page incidents.

### **Regional scenario**

Arguably, for many countries in the North Caribbean, refugees are not a new phenomenon: The Bahamas, The Cayman Islands, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico either as donors or recipients can attest to this phenomenon. The UN notes that the refugee movement is primarily concentrated in these countries.<sup>5</sup> Realizing that Caribbean States have fledging or non-existent asylum systems, the UNHCR established an office in Washington D.C. in 2001. This office has a Senior Legal Regional Officer with responsibility to oversee human rights violations in this region. Additionally, this office investigates the feasibility of the Caribbean region as a potential resettlement area.

The main legal instrument that addresses refugees is the Convention on Refugees established in 1951, and its 1967 protocol. These UN Conventions defines who is a refugee, their rights and outlines the legal obligations of states with respect to the treatment of refugees. However, many countries in the Caribbean only became signatories to these legal documents within the past decade: all but four – Grenada, Guyana, Barbados and St Lucia - are yet to accede to the Convention and Protocol.

Other regional realities are that with the passing of the Caribbean Single Market, immigration laws would become more flexible to migrants. There was much debate about the type of legislation that needed to be put in place to safeguard borders but reap the benefits of free movement of Caribbean nationals. The question arises: Would this encourage more stateless persons in the region? Already in the Caribbean there are several refugee communities in the region. The Hmong from South East Asia and Vietnam have been resettled and 2000 refugees

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Resident Coordinator. UNDP. *The United Nations Resident Coordinators system for Trinidad and Tobago: The Convention on the Status of Refugees*. 28 December 2005.

now live in French Guiana<sup>6</sup>. Not too mention, 1000 refugees in Cuba and a quarter million stateless Haitians in the Dominican Republic.<sup>7</sup>

### **Current scenario**

The Caribbean region needs to be prepared as hosts for asylum seekers, for several reasons:

1. Social: The Caribbean has always been looked upon as a *Zone of Peace*, and with the varied linguistic capacity of territories in the region and the UN focusing more upon this region, the likelihood of the Caribbean becoming a host area is a real possibility. Additionally, many territories in the region have high human development indices and stable political profiles making it more attractive to international organizations that focus on refugee issues, including the Red Cross, International Organisation for Migration and agencies within the UN family.
2. Legal: With the advent of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy, regional legal systems are now being institutionalized to encourage the free movement of persons – “through measures such as removing **all** obstacles to intra-regional movement of skills, labour and travel”.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, with the opportunity presented by embryonic asylum systems, the integration of national legislation pertaining to the protection of refugees and the establishment of the UNHCR Senior Legal Officer for the Caribbean ensuring that legislation is passed and adhered to, the region is preparing to address the issue of asylum seekers.
3. Environmental: Climatic changes ensure that the Caribbean is no longer a shelter in the storm. Changes in the sea level, the volatility of the hurricane season, and possible fallout from the transshipment of hazardous waste through the region may mean that our nationals may be refugees in another country. This engenders good neighborly practices.

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<sup>6</sup> Bethan Jinkson, “Hmong’s new lives in Caribbean” *BBCNews*. [<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/34980>] Accessed 28 December 2005

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR. Summary of the strategic oral presentation of UNHCR’s operation in the Americas, 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the standing committee. 5-7 March 2002, 1-6.

<sup>8</sup> CARICOM. The CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME). [http://www.caricom.org/jsp/single\\_market/single\\_market\\_index.jsp?menu=csme](http://www.caricom.org/jsp/single_market/single_market_index.jsp?menu=csme). Accessed 4 May 2006.

### **Where do libraries fit in?**

Refugee law applies to many Caribbean states; states that are actually protectorates. Libraries of the region are not prepared to deal with citizens of countries who have no legal basis in the country where they seek exile. Prior to now, refugees and libraries in the Caribbean region have not been placed under the microscope, but in circumstances outlined, the atmosphere of the region is changing and more Caribbean libraries need to be prepared for the inevitable. Unfortunately, refugees have less access to information and education than any other user group.<sup>9</sup> Libraries have a unique role in that they tend to be relatively safe, neutral places that offer a vital service: information provision. They protect the right to privacy while ensuring that the right to information is preserved

### **Library-type affected**

As Mason notes, a library may be the first point of contact for newly arrived refugees seeking practical information.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, different types of libraries are affected during the processing of a refugee. Upon entry into a country, asylum seekers are often detained and may spend some time imprisoned. At this juncture, prison libraries are the first point of contact. After release, the refugee may be placed under protective care, and may attempt to use public libraries and special libraries to satisfy their information needs. Upon integration into the lifestyle of his/her host culture, academic libraries may provide fodder for thought; and finally, with absorption and acculturation, special and school libraries may serve as major conduits of information.

### **Caribbean library services to refugees**

Firstly, library staff must remember that most asylum seekers do not have identification papers and are now being exposed to a new culture for the first time. Asylum seekers are curious about their new culture and are also eager to obtain news from home in their own language. The unfortunate stereotype of a refugee is a poor unskilled asylum seeker, however nothing could be further from the truth – refugees are often skilled individuals. Upon entering a library, they may appear disoriented and exhibit symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder having been a witness

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Elisa Mason. *Against all odds: refugees coping in a strange land*” American Libraries Vol. 30, No. 7 (August 1999: 44-47.

to the loss of property, life, and perhaps, other heinous acts. They most probably would not have sophisticated language skills. In this regard, there are many services that libraries could offer: services that could easily be integrated into mainstream library services, but would be applicable to this specific user group.

### ***Language help***

In offering a refuge for the refugee, libraries can develop an array of multilingual resources. This would have the greatest impact and garner a huge response from refugees using library services. Firstly, libraries could incorporate in their collection development policies a clause that focuses on the development of multilingual resources. The *National Library of Canada* has produced a gateway in English and French to help libraries develop multicultural and multilingual resources: <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/multicultural/>.<sup>11</sup> As the site says, '*the gateway offers targeted resources for information service providers who work with diverse communities, as well as entry points for new Canadians, educators, students, and researchers*'. On the site is a useful toolkit, which includes a sample inventory sheet for developing multilingual resources: <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/multicultural/r25-300-e.html>.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than focusing on a collection of printed versions of international newspapers that are easily available online – the library could purchase classics and popular novels in foreign languages or subscribe to international versions of popular magazines, for example, *Newsweek Asia*. Library staff can contact Embassies or High Commissions in the region and asked to be placed on their mailing list for documents in their language. Another useful service is to maintain a contact list of agencies that offer translation services in your country in the event that these services are required; in this way, the service is just a phone call away. Additionally, libraries can contact local immigrant groups and offer a space for crash language courses/language tutorials to be conducted to newly acclimatized citizens.

Libraries with experience in dealing with refugees have tailored their information services to suit their users, for example, the Leeds Library and Information Service have information on their

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<sup>12</sup> Toolkit – Multicultural resources and services. <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/multicultural/r25-300-e.html>. Created 22 May 2005, Updated 15 August 2005.

website about their Library Service in ten community languages – this includes translations of the borrowers’ application form. These are at: <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/Reference%20and%20research%20services/page.aspx><sup>13</sup> and offers links to books and services in other languages.<sup>14</sup>

Bearing in mind the language limitations, libraries may also use iconic signage to assist foreign users to locate useful areas in the library, like restrooms, lockers, the information desk, audio visual/multimedia and reference materials.

### ***Reference tools***

It is important to note that the refugee may be coming into a society he or she is not familiar with so the reference collection would be a popular source of information. Language dictionaries, guides, maps and instructional resources would be useful to create, repackage and store.

In the United Kingdom, the *Birmingham City Council* has a website specifically entitled “Library and Information Services for Refugees and Asylum Seekers”. On this site, there are links to international newspapers online, and they have developed two useful resources an Information Book for Newcomers to Birmingham; this resource provides guidelines for individuals and families who are new to Birmingham. “It will help people to learn about the city and the services they can use as they settle here or in other parts of Britain.”<sup>15</sup> They also have a resource for newly arrived children with specific resources for young children and teenagers.<sup>16</sup>

The Internet would be the most useful tool for finding information online, and refugees should be allowed and encouraged to use computing resources to find useful information. Many libraries offer free Internet access, and some go as far as to develop websites for refugees. The Nottingham City Library Service has developed a site with information about online translation

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<sup>13</sup> Leeds City Council. Reference and research services.

<http://www.leeds.gov.uk/Reference%20and%20research%20services/page.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> Books and services in world languages.

<http://www.leeds.gov.uk/living/libraries/Library%20services/Books%20and%20services%20in%20world%20languages/page.aspx?style=>. Accessed 19 May 2006

<sup>15</sup> Birmingham City Council. <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/libraries.bcc>. Last updated 15 May 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Birmingham City Council. [http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT\\_ITEM\\_ID=48080&CONTENT\\_ITEM\\_TYPE=0&MENU\\_ID=10905&EXPAND=10902](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT_ITEM_ID=48080&CONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=0&MENU_ID=10905&EXPAND=10902). Last updated 15 May 2006.

services and dictionaries.<sup>17</sup> *Multikulti* is an English based website that supports citizenships and offers information on welfare benefits, housing, immigration, health, employment and debt is available translated into a range of languages including: Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Farsi, French, Gujarati, Somali, Spanish and Turkish.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Telecentre***

The more developed and well-funded libraries could work in conjunction with advocacy groups and/or the UN agencies to provide support services. The UNHCR provides satellite phones' and access to photo-databases for refugee communities around the world. As noted before, access to computing resources is crucial for the refugee to maintain contact with loved ones and to obtain information about the situation in their country of origin.

The UNHCR has been working assiduously to reconnect and reunite displaced families via technological means. The library may be able to attract funding to allow it to operate as a hub for refugee connectivity. In February 2006, the UNHCR established libraries in Tanzania and Zambia to deliver health information to over 770,000 refugees. According to the UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner, Wendy Chamberlin "Refugees are among the world's most vulnerable and excluded populations, and constantly face serious risks to their health." Assistance for funding for this project was sourced from pharmaceutical company, Merck Sharp & Dohme (MSD) and the International Council of Nurses (ICN).<sup>19</sup>

### ***Advocacy***

The library has a very direct role to play in offering assistance to refugees by being an advocate for refugees in the community. Firstly, the provision of a temporary visitor card gives a sense of value to someone who may have lost everything due to storm or social upheaval and have no form of identification. Additionally, offering multilingual registration forms and simplifying membership procedures may also assist in making a refugee feel 'safe' in a library.

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<sup>17</sup> Library Services. [http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/sitemap/leisure\\_and\\_culture/libraries/library\\_services.htm](http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/sitemap/leisure_and_culture/libraries/library_services.htm). Accessed 19 May 2006

<sup>18</sup> Multikulti. <http://www.multikulti.org.uk/about/> Accessed 19 May 2006

<sup>19</sup> *Hélène Caux*. UNCHR. New partnership to bring better health to Africa's refugees. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=43ff36594>. 24 February 2006



Secondly, refugees could be hired as volunteers, especially if they have specific language skills or have experience working in a library. A job, no matter how small, empowers and validates and extends a feeling of purpose and a sense of worth. It offers an opportunity for refugees to interact with persons in their new society; this accelerates acclimation.

Finally and most importantly, libraries could organize exhibits, discussions and lectures to educate the public about refugee issues. Raising awareness makes it easier for refugee groups to be accepted and understood. Expanding collections to include titles that address refugee experiences, preparing relevant exhibits around United Nations observances like World Refugee Day (20 June) and Human Rights Day (10 December) are but some examples. Hosting lectures and discussions with UN officials, academics, legal advocates, decision makers, asylum seekers, service providers, immigrant and community groups also help to dispel myths associated with refugees.

### **Conclusion**

As noted, library services for the refugee need not be different from mainstream library services, but rather a collection development clause that covers asylum seekers could be developed and inserted in library policy. After all, refugees are just another type of library patron to be catered for. The soil of the Caribbean is fertile ground for refugee communities to thrive and with the current global scenario and the volatility of world affairs, due consideration to library services for refugees communities is worth a second thought.

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