

# Ethiopian Community Development Council

Seventeenth Annual National Conference

## *African Refugees and Immigrants 60 Years After the Refugee Convention: Challenges and Opportunities*

### Conference Summary

The Ethiopian Community Development Council held its 17<sup>th</sup> national conference from May 2-4, 2011 at the Holiday Inn Arlington in Virginia. This year's conference theme *African Refugees and Immigrants 60 Years after the Refugee Convention: Challenges and Opportunities* was selected in part to acknowledge the 60<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the founding of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and to honor the vision of those who created the United Nation's Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. While part of the conference was dedicated to setting the historical context and examining the current state of affairs regarding refugees on the continent and beyond, other sessions focused on current global and local challenges and opportunities facing African refugees and immigrants.

**Eskinder Negash** delivered the keynote address, impressing upon attendees the need to reinvigorate the commitment to assist displaced populations wherever they may be. Despite increasing compassion-fatigue and the tone of the current national immigration debate, Eskinder noted that the presence of resettled refugees only enriches the very fabric of American life, deepening core humanitarian values and enhancing national character. He spoke about initiatives to improve the organizational structure of the Office of Refugee Resettlement with the aim of achieving better efficiency and resource-sharing among units under his leadership. In an effort to raise the profile of African refugees, Eskinder recounted transformative experiences of senior colleagues he had invited to accompany him to camps, urging all those engaged with refugee resettlement work to visit, to better understand the scale and immediacy of the problem. He applauded the consistent efforts of those who care enough to engage in refugee issues, and challenged all to revitalize their knowledge of and compassion for the plight of African refugees by placing the interests of displaced populations at the center of assistance efforts.

With **Kathleen Newland** as moderator, a panel of researchers, activists, and policy advisors then provided a variety of viewpoints on the conference theme, sharing insights on historical developments and current challenges faced by African refugees and immigrants. **Vincent Cochetel** spoke about recent positive outcomes in African refugee policy that have resulted in increased mobility and less need for protection in areas of West Africa, as well as negative trends witnessed in the pushing back or closing of borders in eastern and northern Africa. Although Africa has less and less external refugees today, the

causes and scale of internal displacement have grown more complex, posing numerous challenges for organizations seeking permanent solutions.

**Susan Martin** reflected on U.S. refugee and immigration policy of the past 50 years, drawing parallels between global occurrences and local policy developments. Current challenges for the future in both U.S. refugee and immigration policy arise from the fact that neither is grounded in U.S. foreign policy interests as in the past, leaning instead towards humanitarian concerns. Although there is strong bi-partisan support for refugee assistance, this disconnect is reason for concern in an era of fiscal austerity. **Eleanor Acer** discussed barriers to refugee resettlement in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, noting instances where African migrants have been targets of xenophobic violence or victims of political upheavals. She urged for consideration of longer-term national legislative changes, particularly in areas such as the expansive U.S. terrorism law which has affected about 18 thousand innocent individuals to date.

Several key agencies also provided an update session on identification and processing of refugees admitted through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program. **Larry Yungk** presented statistical figures for FY 2010's global resettlement needs and outcomes, situating African resettlement needs and actual submissions and departures within worldwide trends. Major refugee populations in need of assistance for 2011 are Somali, Congolese, Sudanese (Darfuri), Eritrean, and Ethiopian. The challenge of keeping the refugee population proportional to resettlement capacities remains. **Larry Bartlett** provided an overview of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration's (PRM) structure and resettlement processing. Despite the low number of arrivals in the first quarter, PRM is committed to keeping resettlement numbers up in FY 2012. Among the major populations resettled are Iraqis, Burmese, Bhutanese, as well as Darfuri, Rohingya, Palestinians from Iraq, Eritreans in Sudan, Somalis in Eritrea, and Afghans in Iran. Similarly, **Elizabeth Runge** gave a brief overview of Department of Homeland Security functions, describing its activities in refugee processing and protection screening. She explained U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service's eligibility determination process, and mentioned internal changes of improvement, such as streamlining paperwork and updating technology to document interviews, currently underway.

Similarly, **Dr. Ruben Brigety** of the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migrants (PRM), gave an update of U.S. involvement in providing protection and resettlement of displaced populations. To date, over 250,000 African refugees have been resettled to the U.S. and of those 95,000 were Somalis and 45,000 were Ethiopians. He discussed conflicts and refugee producing issues that the Bureau is engaged in. The current upheaval in Libya is PRM's high priority as the need to address displacement from the North African country is urgent. Also of great concern is the human devastation caused by protracted conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the effects of which now match that of World War II, with over five million recorded deaths due to conflict and millions more displaced. In light of all this, Dr. Brigety reiterated the Assistant Secretary's position that

resettlement should be used as a political solution for refugee producing conflicts and protracted displacements.

A plenary gathering of academics and diplomats sought to reflect on historical reasons for migrations in Africa, inviting insights from African government representatives on response to current refugee influxes. **Dr. Abdul K. Bangura** shared his findings on West Africa's Mano River Union, using this as regional example to illustrate various complexities of the refugee challenge on the continent. He urged that the refugee problem should be considered part of the development process, and suggested an E-clustering approach that includes the broad involvement of government bodies, institutions of higher learning and research, pressure groups, as well as consideration of communication, security, health, and religious interests in exploring possible solutions.

**Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool** of South Africa situated his comments between two seemingly paradoxical facts: that according to UNHCR, South Africa remains the most sought after destination after the US and European countries for migrants, yet in 2008 the country had an outbreak of xenophobic violence against refugees. He traced South Africa's empathy to the hospitality received in African countries by many involved in the anti-Apartheid struggle, and briefly explained the national legal framework for the protection of refugee rights. Ambassador Rasool emphasized the need to examine issues of identity in connection to the refugee problem, and noted that the very nature of globalization, which assumes the massive movement of goods, cannot occur without its attendant movement of people. Policies should thus be formulated to accommodate and regularize people's lives.

Ethiopia's representative **Ambassador Tesfaye Yilma's** comments focused on the African Union's (AU) responses and mechanisms to address regional and continent-wide crises, including its generous provisions for hosting displaced populations. He confirmed that Ethiopia will continue to discharge her duties in accordance with international law, and pointed to how interdependence between and among communities can ultimately lead to harmonious relationships.

Some conference sessions addressed the international dimensions of the African refugee problem, discussing the causes and consequences of forced migration on the continent, and offering useful updates on overseas identification and referrals from the field. This year's film selection, *Como Un Uomo Sulla Terra* (*Like a Man on Earth*), complimented this aspect by representing and recounting first-hand experiences of Ethiopian refugees in Rome, many of whom have survived harrowing conditions of travel and imprisonment through north Africa, via Tunisia and Libya. In light of recent developments in Libya that have posited African and Asian migrants as political pawns, this documentary brought home the urgent and mounting dangers facing those fleeing turmoil with little protection.

Several concurrent sessions addressed themes in U.S. refugee resettlement, sharing best practice findings in orientation, integration, and service provision. **Ann Githinji** and **Alexandra Worth** shared

their research on how one Burundian family, for whom the pursuit of education was a priority, was adjusting to life in the U.S. Resettled to Charlottesville Virginia, this family was part of the '1972 Burundians' who originally fled violence in their country and entered camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Tanzania, and in Rwanda. The generational challenges of adapting to a new culture were illustrated in the family's story. The younger children seemingly integrated quickly grasping American customs and the English language better than other family members. Yet the parents' increasing reliance on their young children caused an eventual shift in family power dynamics. The parents, who may have otherwise resorted to corporal punishment, were unsure about the appropriate disciplinary action to take, which in turn empowered the children's bad behavior. Adjustment for the children was complicated by harassment at school where peers and others would bully and beat them for their accents. The researchers recommended solutions such as exposing the family to life outside their localized community, and providing opportunities to meet successful individuals from similar backgrounds. They also suggested that a school-based support system for both parents and children could facilitate better interaction.

**Kevin Meadowcroft** and **Diana Holden** of Baltimore City Community College presented another facet of integration -- language education of pre- and non-literate refugee adults, and attendant challenges and methods used to teach a second language. They found that most of their clients equated becoming literate with becoming independent, and were dedicated to learning. Their findings indicate that visual and interactive instruction is by far the most effective way to teach, with regular testing to advance and engage those who have achieved a certain level of literacy.

In '**Voices & Views: Newcomers Speak,**' a panel of Africans shared stories of their relocation experiences, providing insights on their struggles of adjustment and on the rewards of recreating meaningful lives. **Paulette Mpouma**, an African woman entrepreneur, spoke about her project creating the African Memory Game to both educate and entertain youth and adults with facts about Africa. Ms. Mpouma has successfully marketed her creation to museums and educational institutions around the U.S., earning a livelihood while generating interest in learning about the continent.

In '**Telling Your Story: Reframing Challenges,**' **Jennifer Ralston** and **Patrick Hakizimana** explored how community-based organizations could benefit from appropriately crafted story-telling to market the work of refugee service providing agencies and enhance their outreach and fundraising efforts. Effective story-telling includes elements of H.A.T.C.H. (Humanistic; Actionable; Testable; Clarity, and Happiness). The 'humanistic' element allows a story to transcend boundaries and draw on commonalities between teller and listener. The goals of its design must include representing a balance between realism and vision. Stories thus need to be 'actionable,' to appropriately inspire, as those with unrealistic goals will discourage people from taking action. All actionable stories need to be 'testable' to better evaluate the success or failure of meeting a goal; therefore it is essential to have a specific target for each story. A good story is one that is easily understood by the listener, so 'clarity' is important.

Presenters also recommended that a good story should evoke emotion, making its support personally meaningful.

As in the past, this year's conference included a visit to **Capitol Hill** where participants were able to meet with members of the U.S. Congress. In light of impending budget cuts and aggravated conflict conditions in parts of Africa, discussion points focused on the request for sustaining funding for refugee issues and for an increase in the number of African refugees resettled in the US.

The **annual conference banquet** took place on May 3<sup>rd</sup> and offered an opportunity for social networking among conference attendees, local and national community members and leaders, practitioners, policy-makers, and officials. The evening's special guest speaker, United Nations High Commissioner **António Guterres**, offered praise and encouragement for voluntary agencies that continue to meet refugee resettlement needs, urging steadfast commitment and dedication to the cause of displaced Africans everywhere.

Following dinner, ECDC presented awards to deserving individuals, among them Congressman **Jim Moran** (D – VA) and senior journalist **Lloyd Wright**, for their years of community service. This year, the banquet program also included presentation of formal awards of appreciation to the governments and peoples of two African countries – the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the United Republic of Tanzania – for their significant respective actions in offering protection and integration opportunities to refugee communities that they host within their borders. **Ambassador Tesfaye Yilma**, Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy of Ethiopia, was on hand to receive the award. The festive highlight of the evening was the annual raffle draw for the prize of one roundtrip ticket on Ethiopian Airlines to any of its 35 destinations. The winner, **Amira Salama**, Executive Director of Coptic Orthodox Charities in Florida, vowed to visit camps in Ethiopia and Kenya to witness first-hand the plight of refugees and further strengthen her commitment to assist.

ECDC wishes to thank all our program partners, participants, presenters, sponsors, and attendees for a successful conference. As the only agency featuring an annual conference solely focused on African refugees and immigrants, ECDC recognizes the importance of networking, information dissemination, advocacy, and ongoing discussion and dialogue between practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers.