

Ethiopian Community Development Council

Eighteenth Annual National Conference

African Refugee and Immigrant Lives: Conflict, Consequences, and Contributions

Conference Summary

The Ethiopian Community Development Council's (ECDC) 18th Annual national Conference was held in conjunction with its National Affiliate Training in Arlington, May 2-4, 2012. Conference and Training participants were able to maximize on this arrangement which allowed for lively exchanges and well-attended sessions.

Capitol Hill visits took place on Wednesday, May 2, 2012 with close to 30 people participating and meeting with congressional staffers and office representatives to share their concerns on pressing resettlement issues of African refugees. Pre-conference discussions that afternoon focused on strengthening links and creating networks between ethnic community-based organizations and federal partners. Among those participating were the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, the U.S. Department of Education, the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Office of Public Engagement at the White House.

The official opening of the conference was on Thursday, May 3, 2012 and the welcome address was delivered by Dr. Tsehaye Teferra, President of ECDC and Eskinder Negash, Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The keynote speaker, Dr. David Bassiouni, Sr., drew from his vast experience as a former UN official whose work has included humanitarian aid and assistance as well as conflict and crisis resolution, to speak on related issues hampering Africa's development. Other speakers also followed the theme's 'conflict and consequences' trajectory from origins of disruption to possible outcomes, thus considering a broad continuum of significant occurrences and their interplay in affecting refugee lives.

Conference plenary sessions addressed both global and local concerns and provided insights on current African refugee issues from humanitarian, policy, and resettlement perspectives. Speakers included Elizabeth Ferris (Brookings Institution), Richard A. Roth (Bureau of African Affairs), Thomas Debass, (Secretary of State's Office of Global Partnership Initiatives), and Alie Kabba (United African Organization). A panel of experts and practitioners, namely Annie Sovcik (Human Rights First), Christy Fuijio (Physicians for Human Rights) and Philip L.

Torrey (Harvard Immigration Project), analyzed current policies and challenges of seeking asylum. Sessions and discussions were aptly guided by moderators as Kathleen Newland (Migration Policy Institute), Mark Hetfield (Hebrew Immigration Aid Society), and Deborah Stein (Episcopal Migration Ministries).

Concurrent sessions highlighted what was important at community level, sharing best practice experiences and featuring innovative collaborations. Among the topics covered were resettlement and protection for unaccompanied minors; refugee youth leadership; appropriate integration of highly-skilled immigrants; the new Affordable Care Act and its impact on refugee community health; the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) recognition; and cultural orientation. Updates from our federal partners – the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, UNHCR, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services – provided current information on refugee identification and processing, as well as service provision.

This year's conference film *Entrepreneurship in the Camp: How We Live* was shot in Kakuma by FilmAid International Participatory Video Project (PVP) Club which trains young refugees in video-making techniques and allows them a voice in shaping their own narrative. The film captures the dynamic activities and business exchanges of Kakuma community members, many of whom have forged a life for themselves despite the limitations of their circumstances. One conference attendee was moved enough to share reminiscences of his own life in the camp and expressed surprise at seeing his friends featured in the video.

ECDC's Annual Banquet was well attended. This year's banquet theme was *Making the Grade: Giving Back* and the evening was hosted by Maureen Bunyan (co-anchor, ABC 7-WJLA). In her keynote address reflecting on African women and peace, Emira Woods inspired the audience with the potential and possibility of community-building. The evening was festive and emotional as ECDC honored select leaders and organizations whose lives and work have shown exemplary commitment to African refugees and immigrant causes. The honorees were Dan Kosten (Senior Vice President of U.S. Programs, World Relief; Jennifer Gueddiche, (Director, ECDC's African Community Center); and Kassahoun Bisrat (former Executive Director, Alliance for Multicultural Community Services).