

BHUTANESE RESETTLEMENT PROJECT

The Kenan Institute for Ethics pilots a multi-site community-based research project in eastern Nepal and Durham exploring the effects of resettlement upon Bhutanese refugees.

BY AIMEE RODRIGUEZ

NORTH CAROLINA is one of a number of states that will take in thousands of Bhutanese refugees over the next five years as they are resettled by the U.S. government, with a significant number coming to Durham and the wider Triangle area.

Around 100,000 Bhutanese refugees of Nepali descent have been stranded in refugee camps in eastern Nepal for the past 18 years, with the Bhutanese government unwilling to allow the refugees to repatriate and the Nepali government unwilling to officially accept the refugees into the country. Now, other governments around the world have decided to step in. Approximately 60-65,000 will come to the U.S., with the Triangle and Triad areas serving as two of the main resettlement locations.

The Bhutanese resettlement affords an unprecedented opportunity to engage a refugee community before and after relocation and to understand how displacement affects ways of thinking and being. This summer, the Kenan Institute for Ethics piloted a community-based research project, deploying two research-service teams to Durham and Nepal to explore these issues.

In Durham, Duke students partnered with two local organizations, Church World Service and World Relief, to assist incoming Bhutanese as they transition to life in Durham. In Nepal, students worked with Caritas, an NGO that manages the camp education system, to teach 9th- and 10th-grade classes a special two-period curriculum emphasizing the importance of continuing their education in camp schools and what refugee students can expect if and when they enter the American education system in the future. They

also conducted a set of interviews with Bhutanese refugees who are planning to resettle to the United States.

“We were interested in exploring the life stories of these individuals,” said Suzanne Shanahan, associate director of the Institute and director of the Institute’s Bhutanese Resettlement project. “We wanted them to tell their own story in whatever way made sense to them.”


One of the Institute’s priorities moving forward is to create a publicly accessible digital archive of the interviews. “The archive will provide a research resource for people who are interested in learning more about the refugee population, but it will also serve as a way to preserve the refugees’ stories for the community itself,” Shanahan said.

The project’s working group is also systematically going through the materials collected over the summer to explore the kinds of insights that can be gleaned from the refugees’ stories, both of their experience of life in the camps and during the resettlement process.

“There are a number of interesting trends that are coming to light as we work through the material,” Shanahan said. For example, initial findings suggest that while resettlement is certainly an experience that’s unique to individuals, it’s very much a collective experience as well. “People in the camps describe how there’s much less collective responsibility and sense of community now that the idea of resettlement has entered. Psychologically many have already started to move on.”

The Institute’s third goal is to determine whether there’s any opportunity for future research, particularly in the form of a longitudinal

study comparing the experience of a resettled population in different locations. “We’re interested in determining the opportunities to more systematically examine the implications of these resettlement policies on the populations and their well being and life success over time,” Shanahan said. “We actually don’t know what makes resettled populations do well in their new communities.”

The Institute hopes to participate in a broader social policy discussion that looks at the U.S. resettlement system. As Shanahan says, “It’s important to determine how do we do this, and how do we do it right.” 

Badri Rai (Nepali interpreter), Ben Mintz Elkind, Scott Sorrell, Priyanka Sista, Greg Randolph, Neelima Navuluri, Brian Clement, Mari Armstrong-Hough, Damayanti Bhatturaj (Nepali interpreter), Lou Brown

