

Cultural orientation for refugees: a five-day course or years of learning?

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Structure of this presentation

I will briefly talk about

1. Background - my experience with the Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) program
2. Life in refugee camp / country of asylum
3. Cultural orientation: objectives, structure, content and conditions under which CO is provided and profile of participants
4. This will then lead to some reflections about what the program can deliver (and what not) and I will also relate it to settlement realities

1: Background - my experience with AUSCO

I had privilege to be in West Africa twice once as AUSCO trainer, once as observer.

- My presentation draws on both assignments
- Whilst the information is based on experience in West Africa – much of the observations should be applicable to refugee contexts in other regions

Assignment 1:

- In 2004/05 I was in Guinea-Conakry with ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission). We were a team of three Australian-based trainers, all experienced in the settlement sector and one Australian-Turkish trainer, a worker with ICMC in Istanbul – experienced in providing cultural orientation (CO) for US bound refugees. This was a group resettlement program – some 2000 woman at risk had been processed for resettlement. We provided training to some 600 refugees ready to travel (3 parallel classes each with 25 to 30 participants, 9 training cycles of 3 days each).

Assignment 2:

- In Ghana this June (2009) – a team of two Visiting Settlement Advisors sent by RCOA in cooperation with DIAC and IOM. We observed local trainers providing the CO. Our task was to provide input and recommendations to reflect Australian settlement realities.
We observed one training cycle with a group of 12 participants ready to travel. Two of the local trainers were from IOM Ghana (Accra) and one was based in Guinea (Conakry) and joined for this occasion.

2: Life in refugee camp / country of asylum

When war broke out and people fled into neighbouring countries (Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast) – the conditions there were hardly better than in the country they fled.

Realities in countries of asylum

- Lack of public infrastructure, no electricity, no running water,
- Impoverished population
- Hostile reception for refugees, seen as a burden to already depleted resources
- Politically unstable, corruption, road barriers, curfew

- Frequent arbitrary arrests

Whilst camps had some aid infrastructure and provided

- Food rations
- Access to basic health care
- Schools and training programs
- Community development programs

The resources are limited, people had ongoing safety concerns, women were not safe (e.g. when collecting water, firewood), rebel attacks, political unrest – nowhere to go
Understanding this context is important.

3: Objectives, structure, content, conditions under which CO is provided and profile of participants including presenting issues

In part 3 of my presentation I will talk about Cultural orientation and address 5 components

3.1: The overall objectives of the CO training are to:

- provide people with a realistic view about life in Australia
- provide information about available services and supports
- prepare for journey
- encourage people to start planning their future
- minimise anxiety and culture shock and
- enhance refugees' settlement prospects

It is **not expected** that participants be able to remember the details of the information received but more generally be:

- Able to get around.
- understand that settling in a new country takes time – to be less threatened by the unfamiliar
- to be aware of services where they can find support
- know that It is ok to ask for help

3.2: Structure of CO

CO is provided after people have completed the refugee determination process, completed their medical tests and are ready to travel.

IOM trainers service the entire West African region – Guinea, Ghana, Cameroon, Chad etc

- CO is delivered as a **5 day course**, preferably in groups of 25 to 30.
- In 2004/05 it was a 3 days course only – it has been increased since.
- However teaching in groups is not always possible and depends on many factors – more about this later when talking about logistics
- IOM takes a flexible approach to training delivery depending on people ready to travel and their location.
- If an individual or family unit is travel ready - IOM offers briefing with short notice to facilitate travel, rather than asking people to wait.
- In such circumstances training may be in person, over phone, trainers may travel to location, participants may attend training at relevant IOM office.

Training is conducted at camp, IOM office, or other suitable venues

- Training in camp is **not** a preferred option by UNHCR due to security concerns, and because it may create unrealistic expectations for resettlement for other refugees

- There are exemptions e.g. Kakuma refugee camp (Kenya) – where there is no other opportunity to run CO training

3.3: Content of CO curriculum

The content is based on a curriculum / information provided by DIAC.

All relevant settlement topics are covered and include:

- Class introduction (what people want to know about Australia)
- Pre-departure processing
- Journey to Australia
- Geography, climate, population
- On arrival assistance
- Healthcare (health system, GP, hygiene, lifestyle)
- Housing
- Laws (including family law, traffic law)
- Transport
- Culture (cultural adaptation – this also touches on changes in family, roles, parent-child relationships etc)
- Education (children, adults; TAFE and University / with an emphasis that TAFE is a gentle way into education/training and also opens opportunities for University later if desired)
- Employment
- Budgeting

The program concludes with Q & A, evaluation, graduation

Teaching resources and approaches used

- Brainstorming, formal teaching, small group work, role plays
- Linking content with peoples' experiences
- Recap and consolidation of information learnt
- DIAC Settlement DVD, maps, globe, play money, brochures, newspapers
- Participant booklet – summary of training content
- Resources brought along by trainers and Visiting Settlement Advisors

The focus is on immediate issues pre and post arrival

- as said above - it is not about details - rather
- info getting an idea, validate expectations and minimise anxiety.

The **feedback** received from participants reflects this. Having an idea what lies ahead of them takes a lot of pressure off peoples' minds

- *Makes me feel more confident*
- *Yes because it tells you what you have to expect when you arrive in the country*
- *The most beneficial information was the things to do soon after arrival in Australia.*
- *Yes, the course has informed us of new things about Australia which we wouldn't have known before*
- *It was a great orientation. 5 days is good*

3.4: Conditions and context under which CO is provided

CO is provided against many odds

There are indeed a lot of logistical hurdles to organise classes and again during the training cycles. Some examples to share

- Delays in processing – need to re-do medicals, or – even more disturbing - political unrest in which case the preparations for resettlement are a casualty – causing a lot of distress. People are re-traumatized for fear of having to flee yet again, losing out, and resettlement process ‘derailing’. People may not be in camp at time when their names come up and may miss out.
- Communication – announcements for participants scheduled for training difficult. Physically need to go to camp and place list of names on notice board.
- Transport for participants to training venue is of concern. People travel on very poor roads. In both my experiences - although short distance (some 30 to 40 km) one way travel took 2 to 3 hours.
- Missing family members were found within the weeks before CO but not included in travel documents.
- Instances where new born babies were not registered with DIAC and therefore not included in travel documents.

3.5: Profile of participants and issues

Last but not least it is important to know the profile of the participants –

- These may be single women / women at risk / carrying refugee minors / or group of young people
- Level of formal education varies a lot
- If interpreter is required teaching is more time intensive (also interpreters are refugees themselves – consider fatigue, debriefing),
- Understand peoples’ previous experience with western concepts / and their ability to link information with this experience (or absence of it -)
- The history of violence and trauma people experienced e.g.
 - Grief for killed family members and concern for those missing
 - Manifest symptoms of trauma, silently weeping during class, low attention span
 - Fear of unpredictable changes that might bring to an end hopes for resettlement as said – political unrest have derailed many peoples’ resettlement chances

It is important to take these issues into consideration and work with them. They influence people’s ability to learn and retain information.

Whilst there was a **great energy** amongst participants – preparing for departure to a better life – this was at times subdued by concerns and worries as listed above.

4: What CO can deliver seen in view of settlement realities

I assume that the information presented so far provides a clear indication about the program – its strengths and constraints

- Coming back to the title of this forum – whether CO is a *5 day course or years of learning* - I consider it as the first step in years of learning –albeit a very critical and important one.
- CO is a great support in preparing for and assisting settlement of new arrivals in Australia

4.1: Reflections on AUSCO training in Ghana

I want to share the reflections we had in Ghana following the observation of the training cycle by local trainers – and recommendations to DIAC.

Review of training observation in Ghana

- We agreed the local trainers did a good job
- We had a few suggestions to training content and methodology

We acknowledged that there is a limit to what participants can absorb and time constraints to delivery (no time for trainers to consolidate information learnt). It was strongly felt that additional time would be beneficial to consolidate the training using an in an experimental approach.

The recommendations to RCOA and DIAC addressed the following

- consider extending pre-departure CO
- consider post-arrival CO program in Australia – which would be a continuation from pre-departure training
- strengthen understanding between overseas (local) trainers and Australian settlement sector through a 2-way exchange program – this approach is now being considered
- build local trainers' knowledge about Australian settlement sector through additional professional development

4.2: Australian settlement realities

There are expectations that people having attended CO may resettle in Australia with greater ease. And they do – I remember the initial enthusiasm after CO was introduced, how workers in the settlement sector noted that the intensity of the culture shock was decreased and peoples' expectations of life in Australia were more realistic. However there are still enormous challenges for people to overcome. CO cannot undo the pressures of settlement realities

It may be important to look at the settlement realities – in Australia

I am aware that there are lots of stresses and strains in the settlement work.

Expectations and pressures for both parties – the new arrivals and service providers

1. From new arrivals want that things happen quickly – they want to move fast, catch up with lost time
2. From services – there is a lot that needs to be delivered. There is always more need than resources.

And again – for both parties - it is important to acknowledge that settlement is a process –

- It takes time for people to find 'their feet'
- Learning occurs in steps and stages.
- Timing is important.
- Information needs to be relevant. Learning happens selectively
- Planning occurs in steps and stages, too.

Constraints such as the housing crises need to be acknowledged and worked with.

And – we also need to acknowledge that the past, the refugee experience and associated trauma is affecting people and interfering with the settlement process (lack of concentration, nightmares, concern for family left behind – interfering with learning, retention, etc.)

In summary – I think it is self evident that CO plays an important role in early settlement - A very first step in years of learning