

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

In response to the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan after international forces departed, Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) welcomed Afghan nationals on critical purpose visas beginning in August 2021. These individuals received specific assistance as they met the criteria for being at risk of harm if they remained in Afghanistan due to their work with NZ agencies.

The New Settlers Family and Community Trust (NFACT) is a community-based organisation that delivers culturally-appropriate, wrap-around support and services to individuals with refugee and refugee-like backgrounds. NFACT entered a two-year contract with the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) to provide tailored support to approximately 1,500 Afghan individuals (evacuees) who were evacuated from Afghanistan by the NZ Government. The aim of this study was to evaluate NFACT's Afghan evacuee resettlement programme and inform improvements for future resettlement programmes.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This mixed-methods study evaluated NFACT's Afghan evacuee resettlement programme using a cross-sectional survey, interviews, and focus groups with Afghan evacuees and NFACT staff. Study instruments were designed based on the domains of refugee integration as conceptualised by Ager and Strang (2008), which includes markers and means, social connection, facilitators, and foundation. Professional translators, interpreters, and an Advisory Group supported this research. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, the Cochran-Armitage Trend Test, and generalised logistic regression. Qualitative data were analysed using a content analytic approach. Ethical approval to undertake this study was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (23/160).

RESULTS

Survey findings with Afghan evacuees

Of the 101 sampled evacuees who completed the survey, most were female (65.3%), young adults (72.3% were younger than 39 years old), and of Hazara ethnicity (56.4%). A substantial proportion of respondents held a bachelor's or postgraduate degree (Master's or Doctorate) (37.6%). Nearly half (44.6%) were completing or had completed studies or job training since arriving in NZ. Almost a quarter of participants (20.6%) reported being comfortable speaking English. Only a minority had a paid job at the time of data collection (7.0%) or had ever done paid work since arriving in NZ (14.8%). Almost all survey participants indicated having difficulties finding a job, both now and in the past (89.0%).

Most respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the resettlement support they received from NFACT (93.1%). Regarding the helpfulness of support and services, the analysis found high average ratings across all integration domains (mean ratings ranging from 4.5 to 4.9) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not helpful, 5 = extremely helpful). English-speaking proficiency and age were significantly associated with participants' likelihood of making friends with individuals from different ethnic groups and their ease of understanding local culture. Participants who reported speaking English well or very well found it easier to make friends with individuals from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds and to understand local culture. Younger participants found it easier to make friends with individuals of different ethnicities compared to older participants (40 years and over).

NFACT was contracted to support enrolment with general practitioners, schools, and English language classes, all of which were well attended and received. Evacuees also noted the benefits of NFACT's additional services, particularly related to employment (e.g., digital literacy, business starter course), ongoing training, and obtaining a driver's license. Overall, 97.0% of respondents would recommend NFACT's programme to newcomers arriving in NZ.

Interview findings with Afghan evacuees

Twelve Afghan evacuees were invited to participate in interviews following the survey. Three categories were developed that described Afghan evacuees' experiences with accessing NFACT's resettlement programme. A challenging standstill reflected the time and effort associated with establishing their lives in a new country due to language barriers, cultural differences, and adjusting to systems that they were unfamiliar with. Evacuees spoke to the deep sense of loss that they felt since arriving in NZ as they missed their loved ones and the vibrant socio-cultural and economic aspects of their lives back in Afghanistan.

Evacuees spoke highly of the resettlement services offered by NFACT and were grateful for the support to **guide the way**. NFACT supported their immediate resettlement needs in addition to offering programmes that fostered belonging and social connections and built their capabilities and confidence. It was evident that NFACT staff built trusting relationships with evacuees. Cultural and linguistic barriers were minimised, as many NFACT staff were proficient in the same languages, had lived (forced) migration experiences, and were of or familiar with Afghan culture. Staff acted as much-needed intermediaries who could effectively communicate with government agencies to access support.

Evacuees spoke to the need for continued and tailored support to **cultivate dreams and sense of purpose**. Achieving certain milestones, such as learning English and gaining meaningful employment, would require ongoing support, but would lead to better outcomes in the long-term. Evacuees' narratives reflected a strong drive to learn, and to develop their skills to become more independent and in turn support other community members and wider society. Evacuees overwhelmingly recommended NFACT's resettlement programme for newcomers and suggested some improvements based on the strengths of NFACT's existing programme.

Focus group and interview findings with NFACT staff

Eleven NFACT staff members shared their experiences of developing and delivering the Afghan evacuee resettlement programme.

Supporting evacuees to overcome challenges

Staff went beyond their contractual responsibilities to support evacuees with housing, employment, skills training, and social connections, to name a few. NFACT's proactive approach supported awareness among evacuees about their rights and entitlements as permanent residents in NZ and how to navigate health and social services.

Grappling with resourcing

Evacuees had high expectations (that were sometimes unrealistic) regarding the extent of the support they should receive from NFACT. However, as the primary (and only NZ dedicated) organisation to support the evacuees, staff expressed concerns about sufficiently addressing the diverse resettlement needs due to limited resourcing. The need for increased and sustained resources was highlighted given the holistic and comprehensive nature of NFACT's programme and evacuees' need for ongoing support.

Successes and future directions

The success of NFACT's resettlement programme was largely due to the staff members' lived experience as former refugees or migrants and the shared values that guided their work. Their compassionate and empathetic approach were their foundation as they delivered additional programmes to support evacuees, with a particular focus on youth and women. Staff spoke of plans to further improve their programmes and advocate for broader policy changes to better support resettlement in NZ long-term.

CONCLUSION

Evacuees' key resettlement priorities included health and wellbeing, housing, English language proficiency, social connectedness, gaining educational qualifications, learning how to drive, and securing meaningful employment. Notably, many evacuees expressed a desire to build their capabilities and capacities to become independent and give back to society. Given the challenges they faced when resettling in NZ, evacuees were very appreciative of the comprehensive support provided by NFACT. The success of NFACT was primarily attributed to the holistic and tailored programs designed to address the resettlement needs of evacuees. This success also stemmed from the altruistic nature of the staff, who went above and beyond their contractual responsibilities and effectively advocated for the needs of evacuees. Additionally, the trusting relationships that staff developed with evacuees were founded on shared lived experiences, language, culture, and values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To support integration and improve resettlement outcomes for those with refugee-like backgrounds who are resettling for humanitarian reasons, we have the following recommendations:

1) Improve readiness to respond to humanitarian crises

Given the global geopolitical climate, NZ must be proactive in our preparedness efforts so we can do our part to support those impacted by humanitarian crises. Clear guidelines and sustainable resource provisions are needed to support the resettlement and integration in NZ of those impacted by humanitarian crises.

2) Extend and expand resettlement programmes

The success of NFACT's programme suggests that expanding these resettlement services through sustainable funding models to offer more comprehensive long-term support would better address the dynamic and evolving needs of those being resettled. This, in turn, can support improved outcomes in the long-term for those resettling and for wider society.

3) Invest in community-led organisations and professional workforce with lived experience

Culturally-appropriate, wrap-around resettlement programmes are pivotal and thus should be developed and delivered by community-led organisations and a professional workforce with lived experiences and shared values.

ETHICAL AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval to undertake this study was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (23/160). To guide this cross-cultural research, we formed an Advisory Group of four members, including one iwi representative and three from refugee backgrounds. Three members came from refugee backgrounds having lived experience of the resettlement journey, two of which are from Afghanistan and are long-standing and well-respected community leaders. They advised the development of the survey instrument and qualitative question guides, and reviewed findings and draft outputs. Members of the Advisory Group were given a koha (voucher) in appreciation of their time and valuable input.

Relevant documents, including the study invitation flyer, participant information sheet, consent form, and study instruments, were translated into Dari. Professional interpreters proficient in Dari and Pashto supported participant recruitment and data collection among Afghan evacuees for both the survey and interviews. All participants provided consent prior to data collection and were offered a koha (voucher) in appreciation of their time.

QUANTITATIVE PHASE

Study location, population, and recruitment

The cross-sectional survey assessed the resettlement needs and experiences of a cohort of 1,741 Afghan evacuees, 78% of whom were resettled in the Auckland region (Papoutsaki & Bhana, 2023). We recruited a total of 101 adult participants over 4 weeks in November and December 2023, with the majority being self-referrals after seeing the study advertisement. Participants were eligible if they were over 18 years of age, entered NZ via the Afghan evacuee pathway, had lived in Auckland for at least 3-6 months, and were proficient in English, Dari, or Pashto. Participants were excluded if they were family members of any NFACT staff member. The survey was administered over the phone or in-person in English, Dari, or Pashto by a professional interpreter. Survey responses were entered into RedCap directly by the interpreters.