



WHAT FACILITATES REFUGEE INTEGRATION?

REFUGEES IN TOWNS PROJECT 2020 REPORT

What is

REFUGEES IN TOWNS?

Since 2017, the Refugees in Towns (RIT) project has commissioned case reports on forced migrant integration in urban areas conducted by local researchers who live in the area under study. Almost all researchers were forced migrants or members of the host population, experienced integration themselves, and were connected to local communities.

To date, the project has completed 34 cases, with additional cases underway. This report shares our initial findings.



Volunteers and community participate in an event called “Dancing Across Cultures” hosted at the YWCA. New Britain, Connecticut, USA. Photo by Maha Abdullah.

Main Goals of RIT

First, by gathering a range of case studies and reports, we are amassing a global data base that will help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. The cases reveal global differences and similarities in the factors that enable and obstruct integration, and the different ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle with integration. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries (e.g., the United States); transit countries (e.g., Greece), and countries of first asylum (e.g., Lebanon). Our long-term goal is to build a global theory of integration.

Second, the RIT project seeks to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identify needs in their communities, encourage dialogue on integration, and share good practices and lessons learned.

Case Researchers

RIT benefits from a diverse range of case researchers in cities and towns around the world. Each of RIT's cases relies on at least one local individual with a personal history, social presence, and deep contextual knowledge of the community they are describing. These individuals provide both data for the project and relevance for its findings by connecting RIT to practitioners, refugee and host community leaders, civil society actors, and municipal government representatives. We would like to acknowledge and thank our many localized refugee contributors around the world who are not listed by name in the reports in order to protect their identities.

Suggested Citation:

Refugees in Towns. *What Facilitates Refugee Integration? Refugees in Towns Project 2020 Report*. Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University. July 2020. <https://www.refugeesintowns.org>

What is "INTEGRATION?"

Each of the Refugees in Towns (RIT) project's 34 local case researchers was asked what "integration" means in their local context and translated to local language(s): they all interpreted integration differently. Most local researchers defined integration in terms of economic, social, spatial, cultural, and legal connectedness to their new city, town, or neighborhood.

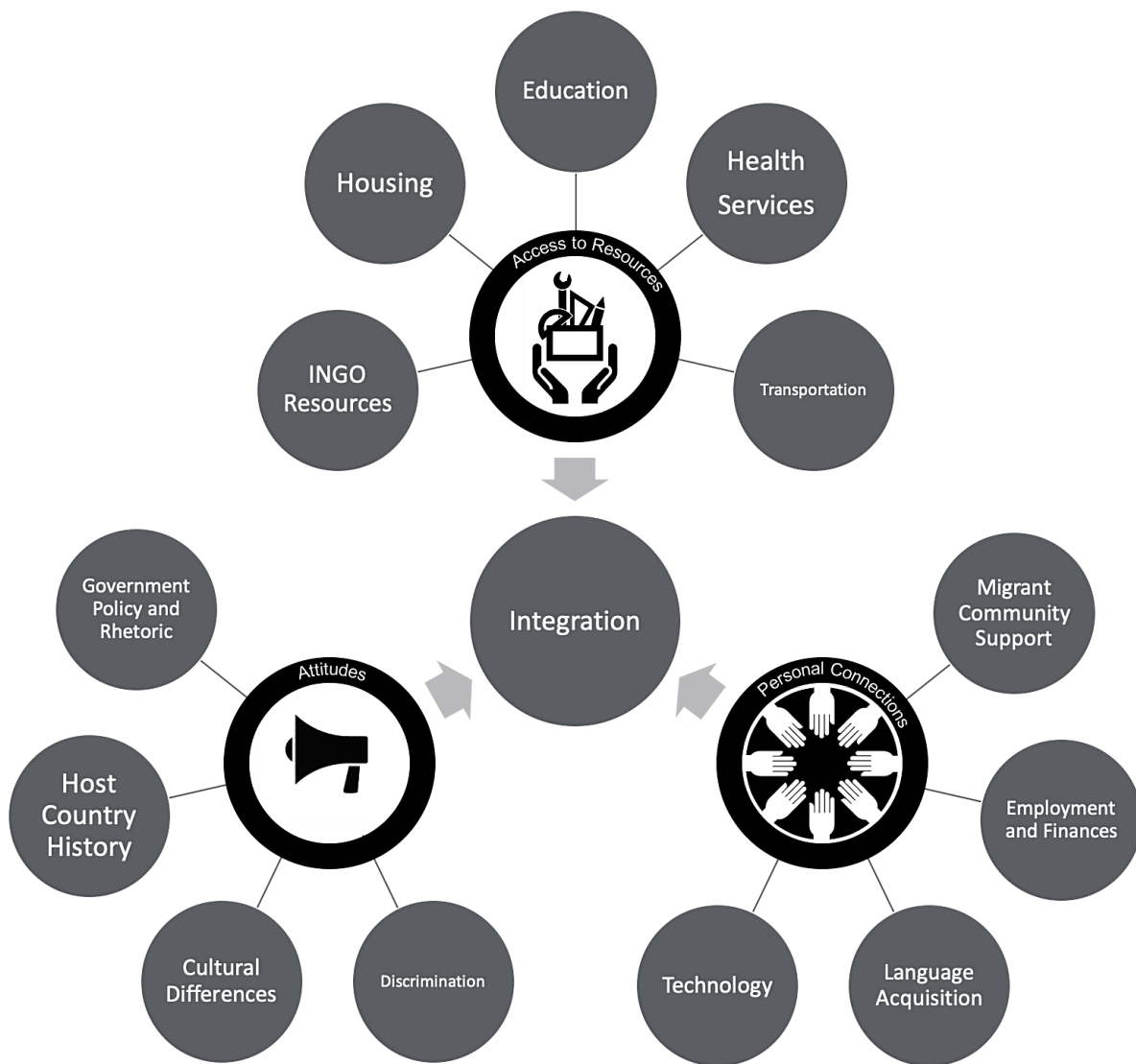
Of these, employment (job security and economic opportunity), access to resources, and social connectedness (language ability and community building) were found to be the most important factors of integration. The Athens researchers explained how these factors are interrelated: "Integration is unattainable without job security." Our Detroit case researcher described how

"integration occurs when people from minority groups, having different racial, religious, or ethnic origins, relate equally with the social structure of the host society to form a whole and to engage with the cultural, political, and social life of the host country."

This definition, though incomplete, captures the concept of integration described by our local researchers.

WHAT FACILITATES INTEGRATION?

Our RIT researchers described three factors that foster integration: access to resources, attitudes, and personal connections. The following sections provide snapshots of migrant and refugee experiences that illustrate barriers to and facilitation of integration for each of these factors. We give specific examples of how integration is affected by these factors, along with links to the example's case report for more context.



ACCESS TO RESOURCES

RIT's researchers identified housing, education, health services, and transportation as critical for successful integration. Access to each sector affected the others. For example, difficulty accessing affordable housing in the right neighborhoods kept refugees from accessing schools and the city's public transportation. Lack of access to financial resources and employment kept refugees from being able to afford long-term housing, health care, and schooling. Across cases these are increasingly more available from private, rather than public, institutions as cities become more and more crowded.



The presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) enabled refugees to get off their feet by providing initial housing support or loans to start businesses; however, NGOs mostly are helping refugees to get off their feet in the short term, but not typically facilitating long-term integration.

NGO PRESENCE

Where NGO support was available, their services assisted refugees in accessing key resources and becoming integrated. Several researchers mentioned the presence of large International nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) who were responsible for providing cash assistance (Thessaloniki), housing support (Athens), and supporting migrants with paperwork (Islamabad) or employment opportunities (Delhi). Others mentioned the role of local NGOs in providing support for integration: language learning (Belgrade), helping with affordable housing (Athens), providing clothing and food (Izmir), and creating cross-cultural social connections between migrants and hosts (San Jose). One researcher described the absence of INGOs as a significant problem for assuring that urban refugees had advocates and services (Dar es Salaam), but others said INGOs had little impact on refugees' integration experiences (Cairo).



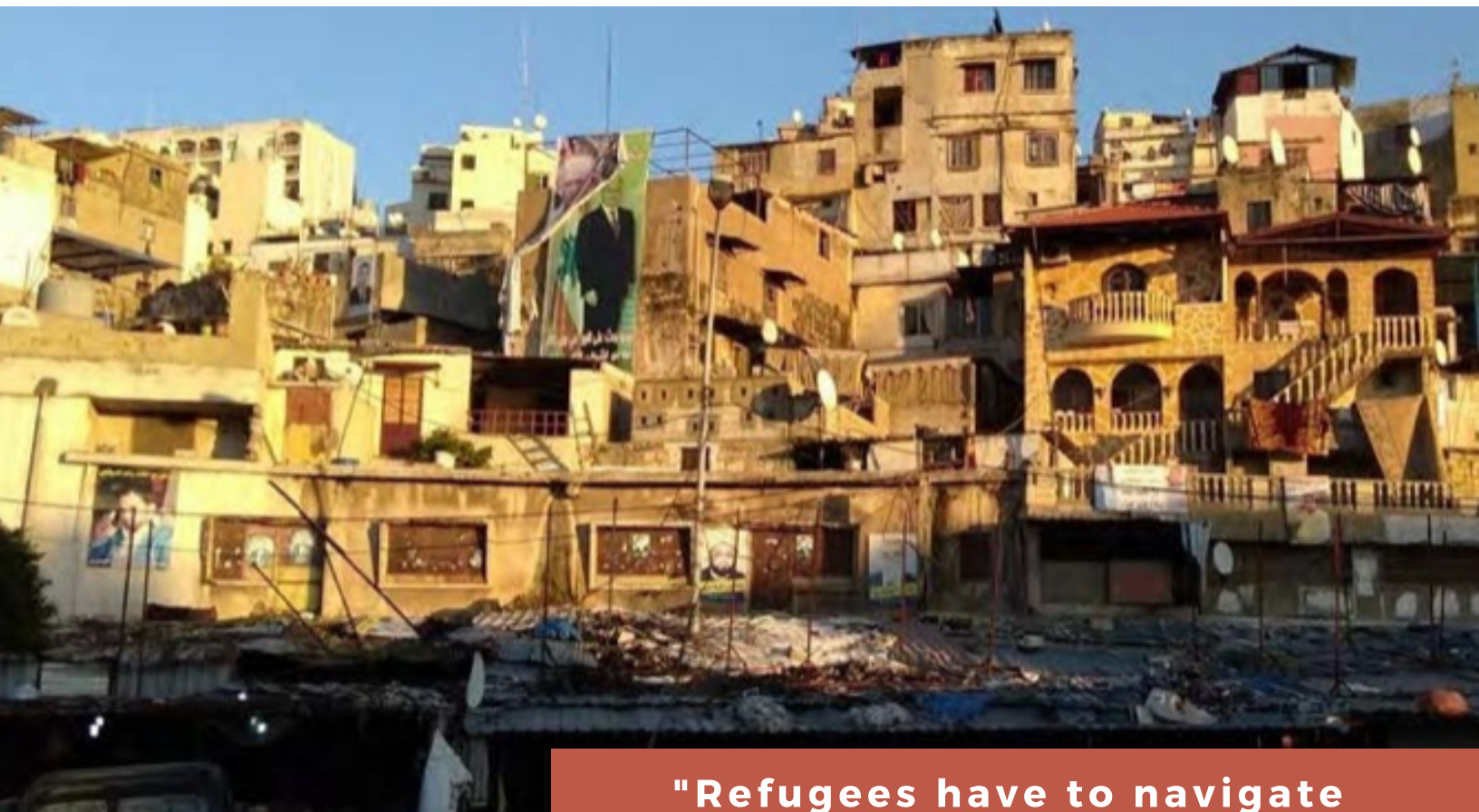
Female students leaving an open-air school. Here, the NGO Cities for Children helps refugees access education. Islamabad, Pakistan. Photo by Mobeen Ansari.

"NGOs and international organizations in Greece are the largest employers for educated refugees, who work as interpreters and cultural mediators on a contract basis."

-Katerina Voutsina, D.A. (Iranian Refugee)
and S.A. (Syrian Refugee), Athens, Greece

HOUSING

Our researchers described housing as a necessity for integration. Researchers widely said affordable housing was an obstacle to integration, pushing refugees to the outskirts of cities and towns, and creating predatory relationships with landlords (Dar es Salaam). In some cities, refugees were spread throughout the city due to a lack of housing (Kyiv). In others, immigrants and refugees formed enclaves (Aarhus), often in poor, peri-urban areas with lower rent prices (Sultanbeyli). Here, refugees are often vulnerable to recruitment by gangs or religious extremists, which in turn brought a greater police presence and exacerbated discrimination in some areas (Mombasa). These areas have more flexible and accessible housing markets, but also tenuous legal protections, limited financial resources and jobs, and discrimination that made refugees vulnerable. Uniquely, researchers in US cities mentioned the ability to own a house as a sign of “being settled” (Detroit).



Jabal Mohsen, Tripoli, Lebanon. Photo by Claire Wilson.

"Refugees have to navigate systems that they do not fully understand to find safe and affordable housing."

-Maha Abdullah, Joy Al-Nemri, Emily Goldman, and Ian James, New Britain, Connecticut, USA

EMPLOYMENT & FINANCES

Labor laws in the host country both hindered and enabled refugees in entering the workforce. Work permits are frequently difficult to obtain, and it was easy for employers to exploit refugees working without legal status ([Sultanbeyli](#)). Refugees with higher education and high-skilled experience were often forced to take low-level jobs. INGOs sometimes offered job opportunities that matched these refugees' skills ([Athens](#)).



"Refugees find employment working for NGOs, owning a restaurant or store, or working in services and factories."

-Mohamad Kasra, Osman Mohammad, Rabih Saad, and Ioanna Terzi, [Thessoloniki](#), Greece

The Basmane neighborhood in Izmir, Turkey has been transformed by its Syrian population. This is the main square, with a Syrian sweet and food shop, a Turkish seafood restaurant, and a Syrian shawarma shop all displaying their names in Arabic and Turkish.

Photo by Charles Simpson.

EDUCATION

There was a clear split between cities with discriminatory education systems and those with welcoming and open education systems for refugees. Several reports discussed specific programs or organizations supporting the education of refugee children ([Concord](#)), while others noted that refugees felt discriminated against due to legal status, inability to pay school fees, or nationality ([Belgrade](#)). Many migrants' educational qualifications were not valid in their new countries, and they had to redo degrees ([Bloemfontein](#)). Of the cities that offered adult education, most were either located in the United States ([New Britain](#)), or had programs that were run by INGOs ([Athens](#)) and were focused on language acquisition. The primary hurdles to success in school were difficulty adapting to culture ([Cape Town](#)), language barriers ([Harare](#)), racial discrimination, and requirements for particular residency documents to enroll in school ([Cairo](#)).

"We don't know how hard we have to try for the kids to integrate [because] we don't know if they are planning to stay or not."

-Greek Headmaster, Thessaloniki, Greece



A group of refugee students from Maitland High School. Cape Town, South Africa. Photo by Barnabas Ticha Muvhuti.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation was not widely discussed by RIT's case study researchers. However, when discussed it was cited as crucial to accessing jobs ([Chicago](#)) and health services ([Irbid](#)). Access to transportation varied significantly by location. Occasionally, hosts cited refugees as having a detrimental effect on traffic ([Irbid](#)), although the traffic increase may be due to general population growth in the host cities. Public transportation was the most widely cited type of transportation used by refugees ([Concord](#)), so their feeling integrated to a city was dependent on the city having effective public transit systems ([New Britain](#)). Some migrants created unregistered transportation businesses to address gaps in public transportation ([Bloemfontein](#)). Carpooling was an important and affordable means of transportation ([Irbid](#)), and a job for drivers (San Jose).

"Among lower-income Syrians, carpooling in someone's van is the most efficient way of getting around."

-Charles Simpson and Agyeab Abo Zayed, [Irbid](#), Jordan



An overloaded Zupco bus, a common sight on Zimbabwe's roadways. Photo by Natasha Venables.

HEALTH SERVICES

RIT researchers described migrants and refugees having barriers to accessing health care that led them to feel unsettled. These barriers included the low socio-economic status of the migrant or refugee coupled with the high cost of care ([Amman](#)), language barriers ([Athens](#)), lack of education and information regarding the services provided ([Austin](#)), legal status ([Dar es Salaam](#)), discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Beirut), overcrowding of health care facilities ([Amman](#)), and lack of transportation ([Cairo](#)). Resources that aided refugee access to care included accessible public transportation ([Chicago](#)) and support provided by NGOs ([Sultanbeyli](#)).

"Overburdened public services in Amman-like healthcare—mean that the ability to pay, as opposed to refugee or citizenship status, determines who has access."

-Allyson Hawkins, Ruby Assad, and Denis Sullivan, [Amman](#), Jordan



Dehli case report author Protiti Roy with Somali Refugees. Dehli, India. Photo by Protiti Roy.

ATTITUDES

Attitudes of both hosts and migrants are important for integration.

Attitudes can be explicit, such as speeches by a government representative and official policy, or implicit, such as the cultural tone of a neighborhood toward a particular ethnicity or nationality. Government attitudes and rhetoric can be welcoming to migrants or can be exclusionary and encourage xenophobia and enclaving. Attitudes vary at different levels of society: local, municipal, regional, and national governments in the same country often had vastly different attitudes.

In Concord, New Hampshire, there was a contrast between the hostile federal attitudes



toward migration, and the welcoming attitudes of state and municipal actors (Concord). National and local history with immigration influenced the attitudes of host populations: a long history of inclusivity supported welcoming attitudes (Chicago), while a historical difficulty integrating migrants resulted in exclusionary attitudes (Amman).

GOVERNMENT RHETORIC

Government rhetoric at all levels has an impact as government officials' statements can carry more weight and authority than those of average host population members. Government rhetoric may differ between levels of government, but all levels of government are important for shaping the attitudes of the society. In some places, government rhetoric was not described as nearly as important as local grassroots rhetoric (Concord), but in other places (Detroit), municipal government rhetoric played an important role in making migrants feel more welcomed and safer while countering more negative national-level rhetoric.



New Britain's Public Library. The library is a municipal service that reaches many migrants. New Britain, Connecticut, USA. Photo provided by the New Britain Public Library.

"Regular police demands for documentation amount to harassment with the intent of bribery: police ask for or accept bribes to release Somalis whose documentation they find to be insufficient."

-Aisha Adan and Ella Duncan, Mombasa Kenya

CASE STUDY AUTHORS' STATUS

The status of the author of the case study, either host, resident, migrant, or external researcher, impacted the views they presented on government policy and rhetoric. For example, there were no cases by migrants in which government rhetoric was considered completely welcoming. Conversely, several reports by foreign authors said government rhetoric was welcoming to refugees (Concord). This suggests that refugees, hosts, and outsiders perceive government rhetoric differently. This difference may also have lent itself to the different topics discussed by the authors as keys to integration.



Men spending their time outside a coffee shop in Al-Tel, Tripoli, Lebanon.
Photo by Khaled Ismail, Claire Wilson, and Nathan Cohen-Fournier.

GOVERNMENT POLICY

"The Lebanese government introduced new residency policies to reduce the burden on state services, causing an estimated 70% of Syrians to lose legal status. They are now restricted in their movement and cannot work, access healthcare, or send their children to school."

**-Akram,
Beirut, Lebanon**

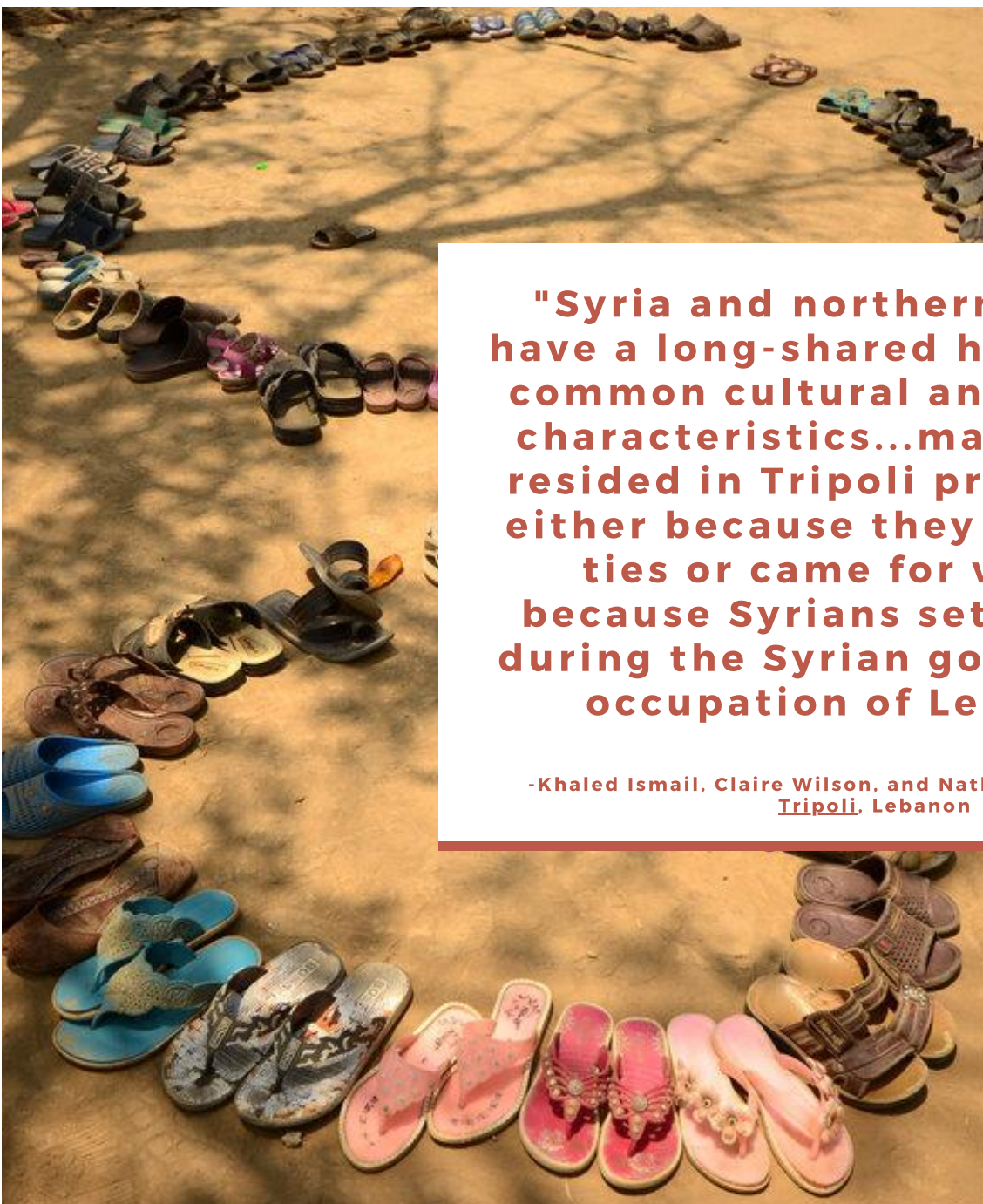
In addition to the obvious impacts of government policy on access to resources, including transportation (Belgrade), healthcare (Beirut), and education (Islamabad), government policy also affects attitudes. While rhetoric may express popular sentiment or views of politicians, government policy and rhetoric are not always in alignment. For example, in Beirut, government rhetoric calls for supporting Syrian refugees indefinitely, but its policies around residency permits, housing, and access to services are exclusionary toward Syrians.



Slowly, Ukrainian government policy has shifted to better support internally displaced students. The main square of Pokrovsk, Ukraine with DonNTU (University) Students. Photo by Maryna Kabanets.

HOST COUNTRY HISTORY

Our case researchers highlighted the host country and city's history with migration as a factor in how open it was to migrant integration. Some mentioned that this did not have an effect (Detroit); some indicated that this history conditioned the town to assisting new migrants (Concord), and others with a history of conflict or tension due to migration featured stigmas and aggression toward migrants (Thessaloniki), or even xenophobia (Mombasa). Several reports stressed the role of shared history between cities (Tripoli) or countries (Thessaloniki) in generating sympathy among host populations.



"Syria and northern Lebanon have a long-shared history, with common cultural and religious characteristics...many Syrians resided in Tripoli prior to 2011, either because they had family ties or came for work, or because Syrians settled there during the Syrian government's occupation of Lebanon."

**-Khaled Ismail, Claire Wilson, and Nathan Cohen-Fournier,
Tripoli, Lebanon**

Multiple generations of conflict and cross border migration between Afghanistan and Pakistan has impacted Islamabad residents' attitudes toward young Afghan refugees. Shoes arranged outside an informal school, Islamabad, Pakistan. Photo by Mobeen Ansari.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Cultural differences between refugees and hosts encouraged cooperation within ethnic or religious groups in support of each other, but made it more difficult to integrate into broader society. In places where the dominant religion or overall culture was similar to that of the newcomers, migrants were able to celebrate holidays with their neighbors (Sultanbeyli) and adjust more easily to their host culture (Kyiv). Some cities stressed the role of cultural appreciation in making migrants feel welcome (Delhi), while some said cultural differences did not matter much for integration (Chicago). Fear of identity loss caused friction between migrants and host populations (East Boston). Migrant groups of different nationalities, religions, or ethnicities also struggled with each other and had biases toward one another (Amman).

"Immigrants and refugees who are acclimatizing to life in Connecticut help more recent refugees transition more easily, while advancing their own understanding of how integration should happen."

-Maha Abdullah, Joy Al-Nemri, Emily Goldman, and Ian James, New Britain, Connecticut, USA



New American Africans Family Fun Night in Concord, New Hampshire, USA
Photo by FieldWork Photos.

SOCIAL INCLUSIVITY

RIT researchers described themselves and other migrants experiencing discrimination upon arrival in their host country, which hindered integration. Some migrants faced blatant discrimination in their host country in the form of prejudice and racism ([Cairo](#)), restriction on where they felt safe moving in the city ([San Jose](#)), and targeted government corruption, such as police requiring migrants to pay bribes ([Mombasa](#)). Other forms of discrimination were more subtle, such as linguistic barriers reinforced without efforts being made by hosts to overcome them ([Cape Town](#)) and the limited willingness of hosts to hire migrants ([Bloemfontein](#)).

“Refugees [who] live in Sultanbeyli said [it] is where they feel culturally integrated. Unlike refugees living in many other districts, the majority of refugees in Sultanbeyli feel welcomed in their new home. They express their appreciation...[for] their Turkish neighbors’ hospitality towards them.”

**-Zeynep Balcioglu
Sultanbeyli, Istanbul, Turkey**



The 'Love Thy Neighbor' campaign in Concord conveyed city residents' overwhelmingly inclusive attitudes following an incident of racist graffiti on a migrant's home. Concord, New Hampshire, USA. Photo by Steve Booth Photography.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Our RIT researchers stressed the importance of personal connections in refugees' experiences with integration. For many refugees, relationships with other migrants from their host country enabled them to become connected to other populations in their new city. For others, local and international NGOs help foster social connections. Although language can be a barrier, NGOs and other migrants helped refugees gain language skills in



both formal and informal settings. In short, our RIT researchers show that having a social support system is necessary to make integration possible.



MIGRANT COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Culture, nationality, language, and gender all shaped how migrant communities support and interact with one another. In some case studies, migrants from different countries in the same host population were very isolated or experienced tension due to linguistic or cultural barriers (Amman). In others, ethnically or nationally different migrant groups provided strong support to each other due to similar migration experiences (San Jose) and found their migrant neighborhoods to be an oasis of support (East Boston). These community ties were a source of resilience and provided tools for integration. Migrants also helped each other financially by pooling money for business ventures (Dar es Salaam), giving rides (Irbid), caring for children (Monterrey), and hiring or sharing information about jobs (Johannesburg). In Detroit, Arab women provided social support to one another and helped each other access services (Detroit). Helping each other to form community, feel connected, and access resources fostered an easier transition to a new society.

"Formerly a truck driver, Isaac aspired to accomplish more and with a few of his fellow workers, he began to participate in a lending group...Every month, each member would contribute \$53 and one person would receive \$352. When it was Isaac's turn, he took the money and invested in a mobile phone business."

**-Aisling O'loghlen and Nondo Nobel Bwami,
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania**



Islamic Association of Central Connecticut's Taste of Ramadan event in New Britain, Connecticut, USA. Photo by Maha Abdullah.

EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCES

Our researchers stressed the importance of work in small local businesses—from restaurants, to gas stations, to selling crafts in the informal economy—as a means for refugees to make a living and become more integrated. Several researchers described how owning and operating a restaurant enabled refugees to become more involved in both the local economy and society (Delhi), and others mentioned migrants as job creators (Makhanda). Having legal permanent status or work permits helped refugees to pursue more desirable positions. Those who owned businesses often had more established legal statuses (Dar es Salaam). Some refugees faced family pressure (or personal desire) to send remittances home, which drained financial resources and made life in a host city more difficult (Johannesburg).

"Somali refugees used relationships with Kenyan-Somalis and diasporic networks to force a door open into Marikiti—the major market in Old Town. Kenyan and Kenyan-Somali shopkeepers credit Somali refugees for making it possible for them to do business in Marikiti."

**-Aisha Adan and Ella Duncan,
Mombasa, Kenya**



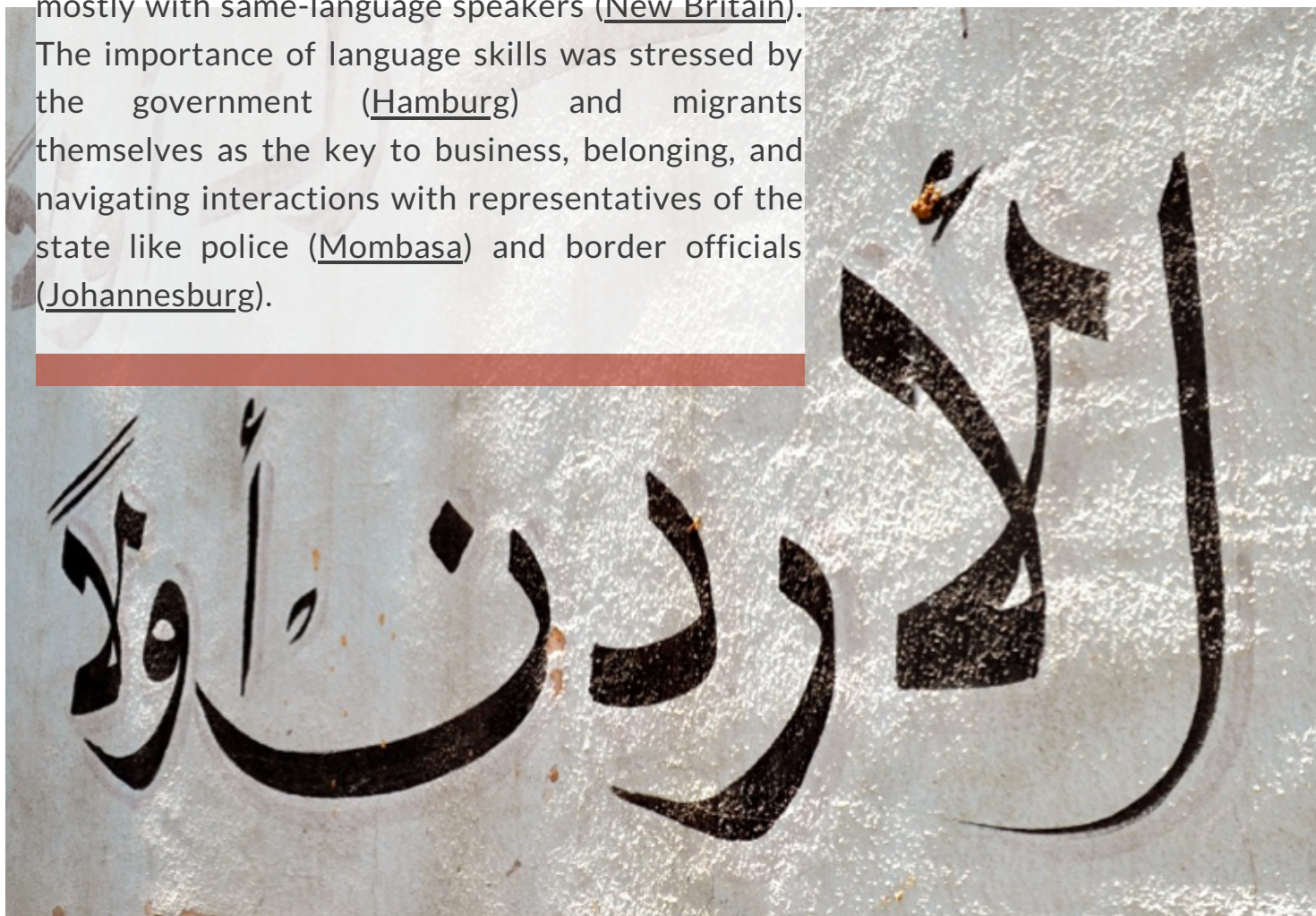
Spice sales and other trade of goods provide a taste of home for Somalis, and a source of informal labor. Mombasa, Kenya Photo by Ella Duncan.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

RIT researchers emphasized the lack of host country language ability as a barrier to employment, education, and social integration. Language support was offered by national governments (Hamburg), local governments (Belgrade), schools (Chicago), or peri-urban camps (Thessaloniki). Language difference was seen as a barrier to employment and education (Augusta), economic integration (Kyiv), social integration (East Boston), and integration to public services like bus transportation (Austin). Language similarity in some cities assisted integration (Pokrovsk), while in others groups of migrants were isolated, socializing mostly with same-language speakers (New Britain). The importance of language skills was stressed by the government (Hamburg) and migrants themselves as the key to business, belonging, and navigating interactions with representatives of the state like police (Mombasa) and border officials (Johannesburg).

"I don't feel a part of society yet. I will feel like an American once I learn the language."

– Yara, Female Syrian Refugee, Austin Texas, USA



Street art in Amman, Jordan. Photo by Allyson Hawkins, Ruby Assad, and Denis Sullivan.

TECHNOLOGY

Few of our case researchers described technology as being very important for integration. When used, its primary purpose was to spread information and communicate with other migrants and refugees through Facebook and WhatsApp ([Harare](#)). Many case studies found that important information sharing and communication occurred in person instead of online ([Detroit](#)). The rare exception seemed to be cities where migrants are distributed across the urban area and could not meet easily because of lack of public spaces and insecurity ([San Jose](#)). This finding may suggest that technology as a means of communication is not as important a factor for integration as is widely assumed, and in-person connections are more important.

"Returnees also used Facebook and WhatsApp groups to help navigate daily life within Zimbabwe."

-Natasha Venables, [Harare](#), Zimbabwe



A wall near a United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) school in Amman, Jordan
Photo by Allyson Hawkins, Ruby Assad and Denis Sullivan.



Eritreans on their way to a park after a baptism ceremony in church. South Tel Aviv, Israel. Used with permission from Jonathan Small Photography.

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