

# Cultural Orientation Trainers Exchange Report: August 2003 - Kenya

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## Purpose and Overview

This report provides an overview of the Cultural Orientation Trainers Exchange in which I participated in August 2003, a secondment funded by the Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration through the Center for Applied Linguistics. My portion of the program included a trip to Nairobi, Kenya and the Kakuma Refugee Camp between August 1 and August 13. I was accompanied throughout the trip by Sharyl Tanck of CAL who was performing a site visit at the time.

There were several stated goals for my portion of the exchange program, the most evident being for me to gain a better understanding of the cultural orientation process overseas and to provide that information to other domestic resettlement staff upon my return. It was also expected that I would be able to share my experiences in cultural orientation as a case manager at World Relief Atlanta with the overseas staff. I thus sought throughout the exchange to record all information offered as well as to act as a resource for questions about resettlement. My personal goals included a desire to get a better vision of the conditions from which the refugees themselves are coming. The opportunity that I had to see their daily lives overseas will serve as a resource for making connections between their past and present in the explanations and trainings I give. I expect that the common frame of reference will make such interactions more interesting for the refugee clients as well.

Below are details of the exchange program grouped into categories of the sites and agencies I visited. With this report, I hope to convey information that I found pertinent in the exchange, to note the kinds of information that overseas staff were interested in having, and also to suggest possible applications of the information for domestic resettlement staff in the US. I thus make suggestions throughout the report on how some of the observations I made could be used to adapt (or underscore the importance of) certain aspects of the cultural orientation training that we provide.

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## NAIROBI: August 1-6, August 9-13

### IOM Nairobi



The IOM Office Compound in Nairobi

The staff of IOM Nairobi served as my hosts throughout the trainer's exchange with Pindie Stephen (Regional CO Coordinator) arranging the scheduling of meetings and visits. This schedule included the opportunity to visit the IOM office area in Nairobi and interact with the staff both formally and informally. In doing so, I was given a very good overview of both the general operations of the organization as well as an increased understanding of specific programs such as medical screenings and cultural orientations for which IOM is responsible in Kenya.

### *General operations/movements*

As in most countries, IOM is charged with facilitating the movements of refugees from and between camps and particularly to their country of resettlement. The scheduling of flights for individual cases normally takes place after JVA has cleared their travel packet. These cases are placed in pre-booked flight blocks by IOM staff, a process which must take place at least one month prior to the flight itself. Names and flight schedules are then posted at the IOM compound and a few other selected locations in Nairobi. (JVA interview schedules are also posted when the individuals cannot be located). It was particularly interesting to see the site where this information is posted since “the board” is often referred to by refugee clients in the US who have applied for their relatives overseas. Of course, individuals are constantly coming to this area with other questions about their cases as well. For security reasons, refugees have a separate and secured walk-in area and can only come into the office area or classrooms for specific questions or appointments.



“The board” where flight info is posted

IOM sees to the arrangements for medical or operational escorts on flights if necessary. The need for such escorts will already have been flagged in the computer based on data from the initial screening. Fingerprinting is increasingly being done on site at IOM, a procedure which saves time in immigration at the port of entry. Just a few days prior to their flight, refugees come to the IOM offices for the processing of their promissory note (travel loan), to sign a *khat* memorandum of understanding, and to undergo a pre-departure medical exam to see if they are fit to go on the airplane. (The fact that so many events take place just prior to departure may explain why travel loan issues are not often grasped by all refugees and need review after arrival.) Identities are checked by a U.S. citizen at the airport (called an IAO) just prior to departure. After departure confirmations are sent to the domestic agency, the file is then closed.



At the refugee entrance inside the IOM compound

### *Medical screenings*

Another important role of IOM is in the organization of medical screenings and health evaluations for refugees. Prior to 1998, these screenings were almost entirely performed by US panel physicians (general practitioners from the host country approved by the embassy) throughout the Africa program as a whole. It eventually came to light that this arrangement was leading to some serious oversights of health problems particular to refugee populations. The whole process was thus revamped and put under IOM Africa’s supervision. In most areas, the program is currently in a transition period with panel physicians still performing screenings and IOM verifying results. Nairobi has an advantage in having IOM staff physicians who do screening at the Acacia Clinic in town. Major medical issues such as tuberculosis are then followed through by IOM medical staff since cases are no longer

under care of UNHCR once approved by USRP. With the slowing of refugee movements, the cost of ongoing care and the repeating of expired medical screenings has become quite an issue.

Though not directly tied to the cultural orientation program itself, the medical screening process as it now stands has important implications for those in the US teaching concepts of health and nutrition. In speaking with the IOM Nairobi medical staff, it becomes clear that, under the auspices of IOM, there seems to be more emphasis on increasing the refugees' understanding of their health and expectations of continued care in the US. The regional medical officer with whom I spoke jokingly referred to this aspect of the work of his staff as an "ESL of health care" for the refugees. Domestic staff charged with orienting refugees to specific areas such as health care and medical access might want to get a better understanding of what they are taught in this regard and use it as an important base from which to build when discussing health issues.

Probably one of the most rapidly changing issues for the medical staff of IOM in recent years has been in the handling of HIV cases since the opening of Class A waivers. Proper counseling is a condition for granting a waiver for resettlement. Up until recently, it had been left to the panel doctor to provide the counseling, but IOM has now developed its own curriculum and encourages the use of a professional counselor. Counseling is gender and age sensitive with an interpreter and pamphlets provided. The medical director noted that he stresses to staff that they should not look at counseling as just giving information; they must also look for changes in behavior and prepare individuals for changes in life. This information is recorded in the form of an assessment with the results being included in the medical file sent to resettlement staff.

I noted that this recent practice of providing records of the HIV counseling and orientation received has already proved helpful to US staff trying to prepare for the arrival of affected refugees. I was also able to share about one initiative for Africans with HIV taking place in the Atlanta-area which was of great interest to doctor. This discussion brought up the lack of connection between the overseas and domestic health. The doctor noted that his group rarely receives any positive feedback on patients and have no way of knowing if recommendations for specific patients are followed. When asked if he would be interested in establishing such a connection with a state health program, the doctor agreed that this would be helpful. He also noted his desire to see more emphasis on mental health screening in their program since it is not sufficiently addressed at the moment. I pointed out that domestic staff have noticed this lack and have found it a point of frustration as well.

### *Cultural Orientation Program and Staff*

Of course, the focus of my time at IOM Nairobi was spent on the subject of cultural orientation as provided to refugees by the IOM staff in CO classes. Pindie Stephen initially provided a brief



Students display their orientation notebooks

overview of the program itself. Cultural orientation follows a standard curriculum which was created from scratch by the IOM Africa (Nairobi) team several years ago and revised most recently in 2001. The curriculum includes the use of a student notebook available in English, Somali, French, and Oromo. (The Oromo version had just been finalized and submitted for printing at the time of my visit). The classes take place largely at the IOM office compound in the Westlands area of Nairobi. IOM has developed a location for classes in Somali in the area of Eastleigh, however, since almost all refugees located in urban Nairobi live in this area. Classes may be 3 or 5 days depending upon the availability of staff and number of refugees needing to be served. CO is voluntary for the refugees, but it was noted that most individuals perceive it as necessary and are eager to attend classes.

Given the small number of movements at the time of my visit, classes were being organized as soon as JVA Kenya provided a list of refugees approved for travel. Interestingly, language is the first determining factor in grouping classes since CO is ideally provided by an instructor speaking the refugee's own language (rather than via interpreter). In the past, refugees were tested and separated on English level so as to incorporate ESL, but this is no longer the case. Refugees in a single class can thus represent a very diverse group with both preliterate and former professional students. Trainers have a goal of using group work techniques, pairing more educationally advanced refugees with those having lower exposure. The director did admit that having a large homogenous group such as the "Lost Boys" or Somali Bantu makes providing cultural orientation easier, but she also stressed her belief that the mixed groups make for a better overall experience for the refugees.

I met with the rest of the cultural orientation staff at one of their regular staff meetings. Pindie Stephen introduced each of the staff members with mention of their activities and qualifications. Most of the staff are Kenyan nationals from the same ethnic backgrounds as the refugees. The staff thus speak a variety of languages including Swahili, English, Oromo, Amharic, Somali, French, and Arabic. That the staff is well-versed in the subjects they are teaching is also evident. Some have been with IOM for over a decade (before there was even a defined CO program), and all have either lived in the US or traveled to US resettlement sites as part of a trainer's exchange. Receiving updated information is also of obvious importance to the staff as a whole. At the time of my visit, they were preparing for one of their regular in-service trainings (cross-training) with staff from other CO programs in Africa. These in-service trainings take place twice a year and allow staff to formalize programs and review best practices.



With some of the CO staff of IOM Nairobi

In Nairobi, everyone shares in all the tasks of the office---trainings, curriculum development, translation, pre-departure orientations, etc. The Nairobi staff are also the ones who travel to Kakuma camp for orientations as well as accompanying Somali Bantus on their flight to the US. A number of staff members have areas of special focus such as youth or women's issues. In addition, some are involved in cultural orientation training for the other resettlement countries with which IOM contracts including Canada, Australia, and certain European countries.

The meeting afforded me an opportunity to share materials from my program in Atlanta and to answer questions about resettlement and cultural orientation. Staff members particularly wanted to know some of the recurring problems that resettled refugees have had and in what ways they could adjust their orientations to address these problems. They also had questions about what topics were shared with newly arrived clients and the ways in which refugees accessed services. I provided a number of items that the staff had requested for sharing with CO students such as sample utility bills, job applications, and benefits information. I was also able to share some of our office's orientation materials for housing and employment. In order to give an idea of the overall scope of services for refugees in the Atlanta area, I also provided brochures and pamphlets from several refugee service providers.

Some of the IOM staff members later gave a tour of the Eastleigh area where most of the urban Nairobi refugees reside and where a number of cultural orientation classes are also provided. Though I did not attend the actual CO classes at the site, the visit to Eastleigh proved to be an important experience simply because it gave me a better idea of the conditions in which most Nairobi refugees live. (The area is actually quite run down and dirty making it obvious that the city government does not officially recognize or provide services to the entire population here.) Also very interesting was seeing the massive number of clothing shops throughout the area at which many of the Somali and Ethiopian refugees work. These shops are largely informal booths with a sewing machine out front. Most are housed together in a

large “lodge” and contribute to a very busy market environment. It helped to give me a better impression of what clients are describing during employment orientations when they talk about their past work in such shops.

### *Cultural Orientation Classes*

As mentioned above, cultural orientation classes mostly take place in the IOM office compound though a few Somali language classes are offered at a location in Eastleigh where many refugees live. At the IOM compound, students arrive for classes in the morning. The classes take place in designated



CO classrooms in the interior of the IOM compound



A group of Ethiopian students in cultural orientation

classrooms at the office site. At mid-day, the students have a break during which they are allowed to go to the canteen to receive juice and a snack. The CO trainers also pass out money for transportation to the students according to the place where they live. Classes continue until the afternoon for a total of five hours a day.

I had the opportunity to visit several of the classes at the IOM office in order to observe how classes operated as well as to participate directly in the orientation being provided. I first observed parts of the cultural orientation for two groups of Ethiopian family reunification (P-3) refugees. The first class I attended consisted of forty Oromo refugees. The trainer spoke in English with an Oromo interpreter. The class had just started the curriculum and was learning about the pre-arrival process and the role of the resettlement agency after their arrival in the United States. I was thus asked to add to this discussion by describing my own work as a case manager and to answer questions posed by the students.

The second class with which I visited was another large group of about forty individuals. The class was taught in Amharic. The group was at the point in the curriculum which spoke about finding jobs and the help they could expect from their resettlement agency in this regard. The

group definitely seemed interested in the topic and how it related to education which I would expect based on the kinds of questions that most refugees from Ethiopia arrive with upon resettlement.

I also had the chance to follow the entire class experience of a group of individually referred (P-1) refugees. This class consisted of individuals from Sudan (both Dinka and Nuer) and the Democratic Republic of Congo. All of the students attending the class spoke English well enough that they had been grouped together to receive orientation in English. (Though there is an emphasis on providing CO in the language of the refugee, I assume that the slower rate of approval at the time meant that a common language had to be found in order to have a full class). All the topics included in the student curriculum were reviewed to varying degrees. I was also given the chance to answer questions raised by students.

My time spent in the CO classes gave me the chance to see the cultural orientation training environment and process. It also allowed me to take note of several points that were interesting to me as a case manager. One of the first was simply to see first hand the level of knowledge that the CO staff in Nairobi have about the subject of US resettlement. Refugees often arrive to the US with misconceptions about life in America and unrealistic expectations of what they will receive. It is easy for domestic resettlement staff to harbor the suspicion that this information might have been shared in cultural orientation despite the defined curriculum since the refugees often state that they “learned it in class”. For the staff of IOM Nairobi at least, I would feel confident that this is rarely the case. The whole staff seemed very aware of the process of resettlement, hardly surprising given the length of time the Nairobi program has been in place and the connections it has already established. They also showed a desire to remain current about issues affecting their work. In discussions with staff, I found that they were already aware of many of the misconceptions that refugees bring to the US and that they do address them. In fact, as I instructed some of the classes and made certain points that I felt to be particularly problematic, I noted the trainers nodding their heads in agreement as though they too would have emphasized the same points.

As far as the classes themselves, I was glad to have the opportunity to see which topics were addressed and the level of emphasis that was placed on each. United States laws and the process of finding jobs and maintaining a household seemed to receive the most focus. The students seemed very interested in these topics as well. In each class, I also stressed the importance of establishing and maintaining communication with their case manager about the issues and questions that might arise during their resettlement.

Despite the standard curriculum, there was of course some difference in teaching styles. One of the most effective techniques seemed to be consistently asking the students to describe their own country in relation to a particular topic being studied. The instructor would then provide a comparison or contrast regarding life in the US. Not only did this raise the interest of the students and encourage an active dialogue, but it also helped the students think realistically about resettlement by dealing with the subject of expectations. (For example, in speaking of discrimination the trainer pointed out that all the countries from



Congolese and Sudanese students work on a group activity

which the students came had discrimination and that they should not expect the US to be any different. The difference, the trainer noted, is that the US has laws that govern discrimination and are enforced.) The trainers also used techniques such as role play (mock job interviews), workbook activities (creating a budget), and displaying supplementary materials (copies of I-94s) to varying degrees. In the class taught in English, the students also watched videos related to U.S. laws and safety issues such as 911. (I am not sure if similar videos are used in the non-English language classes, however, since it was not the standard *Welcome to the United States* video that is translated in several languages. Unfortunately, some of these videos were rather outdated and not geared toward refugees specifically.)

One particularly striking, though perhaps not very surprising, fact about the classes to me was the distinct difference between the interest and level of participation of students of the family reunification classes versus the individual referrals. The P-1 refugees were very eager and full of basic questions (*Is it cold everywhere in the US? How will I know what to do if I run into trouble?*). The family reunification cases, on the other hand, did not seem to have many questions related to American life in general. The trainers themselves highlighted this difference as well, noting that most of the family reunification cases

lacked interest in participating in the class since they were confident that they knew enough about the topics anyway. As a case manager, I know that these attitudes carry over to the US and leave many refugees quite discouraged when reality does not meet their expectations. Indeed, I was especially disappointed that most of the questions from the P-3 classes dealt with the topic of moving after arrival to



Another cultural orientation class at IOM

the US and the lack of participation of family sponsors. (*What if my relatives are not able to help? What if my relatives do not sign the form for me - can I still come? Who will meet me at the airport if they moved and don't know about my arrival? What if I want to move?*) These post-arrival issues have been consistently problematic among these populations, and it is surprising that the issues are already primary in the minds of these refugees before their arrival to the US.

### *CO Suggestions*

All of these observations lead to several suggestions for overseas CO staff and domestic resettlement staff in the US. For the Nairobi trainers, I would first hope that they could find a way to address the problem of family reunification cases who do not seem to participate fully in the cultural orientation classes. It would perhaps be worthwhile to solicit resettlement staff in the US for specific examples of negative experiences or disappointments encountered by refugees who had put more weight on the incorrect advice of friends than the realistic recommendations of resettlement staff. Though no one wants to present a negative picture of resettlement, doing so might encourage the students to pay attention in order to avoid having some of the same experiences. I would also point out the comment that was made to me by a refugee at a difficult point in her resettlement. In speaking of the CO classes in Nairobi, she stressed the need for trainers to share with students how hard life in the US might be because refugees will never admit this fact to their relatives back home. In fact, after discussing many of the problems she was encountering at the time, I asked if she had shared these difficulties with friends and family back in Africa. She admitted that, quite the opposite, she had painted life in a fairly good picture so as to have them avoid worry. She hoped that they would hear about the difficulties to expect in resettlement from their orientation instead.

I would also suggest that Nairobi trainers spend more time talking about the issues of moving within the US, families separating shortly after arrival, and minors being placed with non-parents. While these topics are somewhat addressed in the orientation, I did not get the impression that they were addressed equal to the extent to which they occur and create problems. Many refugees do not understand all the intricacies involved in secondary migration and fail to understand that no one is required to help them upon their arrival to their new area. Often, they will move away from a location after only a few months in order to avoid some difficult situations and/or because they have heard they can get better education or longer benefits elsewhere. They rarely believe that such a move simply delays having to face those same issues in the future. Minors end up having trouble accessing school and medical care without a parent or legal guardian if families move apart. Benefits such as Medicaid are not automatically transferred and, by moving and not reporting address changes for the travel loan, many refugees have been left with bad credit. More importantly, the number of families separating at arrival gives a very negative impression of these claimed relationships and might put into question the whole program of family reunification. As students ask about whether they are allowed to move once in the US, they should also be cautioned of the realities as well. Since friends and family are often encouraging refugees to seek better options elsewhere, it would be good if they had a solid and realistic picture of these issues from the start.

For domestic resettlement staff in the US, I would again emphasize the importance of differentiating between what refugees have learned from rumors heard through friends and what they learned in CO classes. I would suggest that everyone obtain a copy of the African cultural orientation workbook since it is relatively closely followed by the trainers and students. This book might be a useful tool not only in thinking of orientation topics for the US but also in creating a connection between the resettlement experiences faced by refugees and the information that they were given in Nairobi. As I mentioned above, it seemed many of the students picked up more on concepts when they felt like they already had some knowledge about it. Perhaps making those kinds of connections will help resettled refugees see more of the value of CO classes and spur them to encourage their relatives to participate and ask questions before hand.

### **Refugee Processing (UNHCR, US Embassy, JVA Kenya)**

In addition to interacting with the cultural orientation staff of IOM, I also had the opportunity to visit several organizations involved in the processing of refugees overseas. These visits helped me gain a better understanding of the work of those agencies and to answer questions about domestic resettlement and orientation for the staff. The head resettlement officer of the Nairobi UNHCR branch office explained about the decisions made regarding resettlement priorities and some of the ways in which the process has changed over the past few years. He described the way in which the UNCHR office is supposed to act as the normal path for resettlement referrals and noted that Kakuma is figuring largely in plans for the coming year since resettlement is looking like a better option than trying to maintain the camps. Despite the emphasis on Kakuma, however, the number of people accessing the UNHCR offices in Nairobi remains high as a tour of the large and recently upgraded accommodation area showed. The interim Refugee Coordinator at the US Embassy also stressed a desire to work more to address some of these long-standing issues. Though the embassy can offer referrals as well, she stressed their preference to work through the UNCHR office. The embassy tries instead to focus more upon the big picture of resettlement options in order to maximize and get the best for larger groups (e.g., local integration). Both of these organizations also stressed the need to maintain the integrity of the refugee program for the future.

JVA Kenya is perhaps the processing entity most directly tied to the US resettlement agencies in terms of interaction with US staff and questions from refugees, so the tour of this office were particularly interesting. The representative explained that the Affidavits of Relationship (AORs) of relatives applying for family overseas that that were once sent directly to JVA are now vetted by RPC/DHS first. Once received by JVA, individuals are notified of scheduled interviews by letters sent to their given address. This process has been problematic because most refugees move or share post office boxes and thus do not receive their notification. JVA has thus had to resort to less effective means including posting notices at the IOM offices and informing US anchor relatives of appointments. In the letters, individuals are told to arrive early the morning of the interview and to plan to spend all day because, interestingly, they will pass through the entire three step process of case history in one long day. Given the number of individuals that are seen and the emotionally charged atmosphere of possible rejection, the representative noted how wearying this all-day process can be for JVA staff.

One major subject of discussion in this meeting regarded the efforts of JVA to insure against fraud. The JVA representative described many of the specific measures that the organization takes to combat this potential problem. She also noted some frustration, however, that many such efforts do not seem to be well understood by domestic resettlement staff, leading to criticism of JVA's actions and decisions. In fact, she noted a fear that some advocacy efforts of by the volags may actually undermine these procedures. In the end, she did note that the vast majority of family reunification cases submitted are approved by JVA. Nevertheless, I came away from the meeting with a sense that a growing atmosphere of suspicion makes it important to stress even more the seriousness of family reunification applications, the need for clarity of defining relationships, and the importance of avoiding actions that,

though innocent, could give an appearance of fraud such as families dividing soon after arrival or moving away from their anchor relatives.

## **GOAL Nairobi**

One particularly interesting visit in Nairobi included an overview of the work done by GOAL and its accommodation center. GOAL is an Irish non-governmental organization with many small, need-specific projects worldwide. In 1999, GOAL began helping UNHCR to address the issue of urban refugees in Nairobi by creating several programs for them to access through UNHCR referrals. Some of these refugee-oriented services center around issues of physical and mental health such as the provision of private counseling (particularly for torture or rape victims) and assistance for refugee medical appointments. GOAL also maintains a health clinic and pharmacy which can provide primary care lab



One of the housing blocks located at the GOAL Accommodation Center



Somali Bantu children outside the nursery at GOAL

tests, pre-/post-natal care, and interpretation services. Other services focus on safety and accommodation such as providing safe homes for cases in need of special protection or supplying other kinds of housing for cases needing shelter. The director of the agency noted that the organization takes a holistic approach in all of its programs, seeking to use opportunities of interaction with refugees to address a wide range of life issues and give them an idea of what to expect in their country of resettlement as well.

Of particular note in regard to this preparation for resettlement is the GOAL Accommodation Center or GAC. This housing facility in Nairobi consists of three blocks that can house up to 400 individuals. For UNHCR, the center acts as a site for long-term housing for refugees with medical or protection issues that make it impossible for them to stay in the camps. However, GOAL also contracts with IOM to use the facilities as a transit center for refugees from the camps since many of these refugees might be brought to Nairobi over a week ahead of their scheduled flight. Urban refugees also pass through the center, usually the same day of their flight in order for their luggage to be tagged, checked, and taken to the airport

Through the center, GOAL provides housing, food, and some transportation assistance. People must sign accommodation forms that stipulate certain rules and requirements that must be followed in order to stay at the facility. Each housing block offers dorm style rooms with beds, showers, and toilets. Toiletries (e.g., toothbrushes) are

provided to the refugees as well as some additional clothing if available. Everyone participates in the activities of cleaning and food preparation. On the grounds of the center are also a nursery for young

children, a small local “store”(since residents cannot leave to buy items they might desire), a recreation area, and a resource center to get books or learn computer with a volunteer. All of these are available for use by the refugees staying there.

Prior to using the GAC facilities, IOM had been placing its transit caseload in unsupervised housing in Eastleigh which was beginning to lead to logistical and security problems. The GOAL Accommodation Center thus provides a better living situation for this group. More than this, however, it also offers a good introduction to certain situations and concepts that the refugees will encounter in their place of resettlement. In some cases, for example, it may provide the first introduction to modern facilities, to the concept of responsibility for housing, and to an organized childcare system. Knowing that refugees that passed through the center have had such exposure might enable resettlement staff to create bridges of understanding and provide an easy reference for teaching similar concepts in the US (i.e., leases, daycare, apartment life). I highlight this issue more in my discussion of the Somali Bantu.

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## **KAKUMA: August 6-9, 2003**

### **Kakuma Camp**

Between August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, my exchange to Kenya included a trip to Kakuma refugee camp in the north-western section of the country. During that time, I was able to interact with individuals and agencies there and to observe some of the daily life of refugees in the camp. Prior to the arrival of the first refugees and agencies seeking to aid them, there was not much in this dry and dusty area---essentially a desert bisected by dry river beds that are only filled briefly in the rainy season. Over a short time, however, the camp grew into a large and sprawling area many miles long filled with refugee shelters and agency office compounds throughout. The camp is made up of three sections containing a total of eight zones divided by ethnicity. The majority of refugees there are Sudanese, Somali, and Ethiopian with some Eritrean, Congolese, Burundi, Ugandan, and Rwandan refugees as well. As new refugees are settle are accepted, new sections might continue to be added.

The camp itself is largely made up of the small mud-bricked, tin-roofed shelters that house refugee families. These areas are open and, while they cannot live in the same area, local populations will freely enter the area to sell goods or utilize some programs to which they are given



An overview of the older sections of Kakuma camp



Refugees and local peoples in the makeshift market area of the camp

access. Since many refugees in the camp have lived there for over a decade, the older areas have become rather well established with market areas and a surprising array of services run by the refugees themselves. (A detailed map of the area can be downloaded from the Lutheran World Federation website at [http://www.lwfkenyasudan.org/kakuma\\_refugee\\_camp.htm](http://www.lwfkenyasudan.org/kakuma_refugee_camp.htm)).

In the camp are a number of implementing partner organizations. Each agency has its own office compound and service area in or around the camp area. These are the only areas that are closed off with fencing and guards due to the need for security. Most of the partners are independent entities with specific responsibilities, but it is striking how well all the various groups interact to insure the operation of the camp as a whole. While UNCHR manages the camp as a whole, for example, the reception center for new refugees is maintained by LWF. IRC will do a medical check there to see if quarantine is needed. Once registered, these refugees are assigned a shelter perhaps constructed by World Vision. Based on the refugee numbers noted by UNHCR, WFO provides food which is then distributed by LWF who also oversees the water supply. UNHCR will arrange for protection for specific cases through organizations such as JRS while IOM helps with the communication of medical appointments made by IRC and provides a place for JVA and immigration processing staff to do interviews. With this kind of interaction and cooperation, the massive effort of maintaining such a refugee camp seems to run relatively well. Below I highlight the work of some of these organizations in more detail.

### **UNHCR Kakuma Sub-office**

The UNHCR Kakuma Sub-office maintains the camp as a whole though much of this process is done with the help of implementing partners as I described above. I met with both the resettlement and protection officers at the office who explained much of the process such as identification of individual cases and the screening and interview of possible referrals. In addressing protection issues in the camp, UNHCR might seek to provide safe housing for individuals at risk or seek to resolve the conflict. General security entails cooperation with the police and government of Kenya to maintain the safety of the camp area. One interesting example of this cooperation regards the issue of female circumcision which falls under the gender and sexual violence program of UNHCR. The protection office has channels to find out if such a practice is being planned and will call local police to make a raid. There are apparently few instances of this practice in Kakuma because refugees know it will be taken seriously.

In terms of resettlement, the office processes regular resettlement cases and might receive specific referrals from the other agencies in the area (protection cases, medical cases). Group processing (such as with the Somali Bantu) follows negotiations with governments. Cases identified for resettlement are sent to UNHCR Nairobi where final decisions are made. These cases are sent to the embassy who sends them to JVA Kenya to plan for processing. Representatives from JVA and immigration go to Kakuma for interviews (facilitated through IOM). Once approved, the refugee case is passed to IOM.

### **IOM Kakuma**

As in Nairobi, the staff of IOM acted as my hosts during the time of this visit. Lilian Ambuso (Operations Assistant) arranged for a number of site visits with implementing partners and groups within in the camp area. She also explained the principal activities of IOM which include general camp operations, movements of refugees, medical screenings, and cultural orientation. In terms of general operations, the IOM staff have a number of responsibilities. They host and provide a base of operations for processing staff of JVA and immigration when they come to Kakuma, for example, which requires quite a bit of coordination with those organizations in Nairobi. They also serve as a source of communication with the refugees themselves since they are in charge of distributing information about screenings, medical appointments, and other announcements from partner organizations. One staff member will drive around the entire area daily to post information on fifteen announcement boards throughout the camp. All the refugees come to look at the boards nearby their area.



An announcement board outside the IOM compound in Kakuma

IOM provides funding and supervision to a number of camp projects and helps maintain the safety and organization of many refugee groups that have been designated for resettlement such as the Somali Bantu. All necessary coordination with processing and government entities passes through the IOM office. When flight bookings for refugees are completed by the Nairobi office and sent to Kakuma, IOM also arranges to get the group down to Nairobi. When you consider that the trip to Nairobi requires arranging for an hour drive with armed escort to the airstrip in Lokichoggio followed by a two-hour flight to the city (for many refugees the first airplane ride in their lives), it is obvious that this is quite an operation.

### *Medical screenings*

The medical clinic on the IOM compound deals fairly exclusively with issues of medical screening for resettlement. The unit has a number of facilities to accomplish this task including screening rooms, pre-/post-test counseling rooms, a mobile radiography unit, and a medical lab. It takes 5-7 days to complete a medical file. If a particular condition is found, an email is sent to the CDC with symptoms. The CDC will then note if the condition is excludable because it is Class A or if a waiver is possible. IOM sends medicals (and notes) to JVA who should include them in the biographical report. Of course, the office does more than just a cursory examination. It also provides counseling, follow-up, and referrals to other health programs in order to insure the health and safety of individuals and the community.

Once refugees are scheduled for departure via Nairobi, pre-medicals are done three days before they leave. Circumstances may have changed drastically for the person's health in the time since their medical screening, so certain aspects of their health condition are rechecked. This check helps to insure the best way to protect the patient (by not placing a nine month pregnant woman on the flight, for example) and the general public (such as not sending TB infectious individuals). Any particular needs are noted and included in the travel information.

### *Cultural orientation*

As in Nairobi, IOM is charged with providing cultural orientation classes to refugees accepted for resettlement in the US. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to observe an actual orientation class in Kakuma because there were none scheduled at the time. (Processing had been all but halted prior to my visit and JVA and immigration officers had not been to the camp for many months. Thus no refugees were travel ready at that time.) I was able, however, to tour the classroom where refugees attend these classes and to speak with the individuals involved about the differences and similarities of cultural orientation in Kakuma and Nairobi.

The cultural orientation trainings in Kakuma are led by CO staff from the Nairobi office. Trainers might travel quite frequently between the two sites in a time when many orientations are in process. Cultural orientation classes normally follow the same basic African CO curriculum presented in regular CO classes in Nairobi. However, there are many added components that focus on basic aspects of daily life such as living in a modern home. The Kakuma orientations have had these added components in the past because most of the original groups in the camp (primarily the “Lost Boys” of Sudan) did not have the necessary life skills. While this may no longer be true for all groups in the camp, it remains especially relevant for the Somali Bantu who will probably make up the bulk of CO trainings in the near future. Over time, therefore, IOM has built up its cultural orientation classrooms to include fully functional models of appliances and fixtures for an American kitchen and bathroom. Trainers are able to demonstrate all of these facilities. I discuss more about this topic in regard to the Somali Bantu later.



A model kitchen in the Kakuma classroom

## **International Rescue Committee**

Though the IRC maintains a number of programs in the camp (one of which is a literacy program for the Somali Bantu), their primary responsibilities in Kakuma cover the areas of health and sanitation. Much of the health work is preventative with programs of nutrition, reproductive health, and community outreach. Sanitation issues also seek to preserve health through disease control, removal of bodies of the deceased, meat inspections, and animal (dog) control.

IRC also provides the day-to-day medical care for the refugee population through a network of four clinics around the camp as well as a camp hospital for more serious issues. Child health makes up a lot of this work though the hospital only oversees the delivery of babies in about 30% of cases when there are potential problems. Seventy percent of births take place in the community with mid-wives trained through IOM. Overall, the medical care in the camp seems to make a significant impact since the refugee health statistics in Kakuma are better than the Kenyan average. The camp operation is thus of interest to the Kenyan government with which there is a good deal of cooperation, and a number of Kenyan government secondee staff are on site. Local Kenyan populations (largely Turkana) are also able to access these medical services.

I had the opportunity to visit the central medical clinic in the camp called Clinic Five which is administered by IRC. The clinic has thirty-five staff members (the majority of whom are refugees that have been trained to address health issues) and sees over 100 patients each day. The clinic has an open reception area where patients enter and are assigned numbers. Medical assistants meet with clients to perform a general assessment and offer prescriptions or referrals for basic problems. Complicated cases are passed to clinic officers who are more trained to offer care. The clinic has a number of facilities onsite including a dispensary and pharmacy for prescriptions as well as an onsite laboratory for basic lab testing.

In addition to basic care, the clinic provides a number of specific programs including mental health counseling services, immunization, family planning, and ante-natal (pre-natal) care. One of the largest of the clinic's offerings is the nutritional feeding program. Infants and children are weighed and measured and a height-weight ratio is established. Any children under 70% (very malnourished) are sent to the therapeutic nutrition program which offers a mix of milk and grain to support the digestive system and re-establish appetite and a weight. Children with a ratio between 70 and 89% go to the Supplementary Food Center. The SFC is also provided for lactating mothers, pregnant women, medical cases (such as tuberculosis or HIV patients), and others with particular health risks. This program provides a week supply of basic dry rations to supplement normal food rations (grains and oil) as well as education on how to prepare the food. Continued follow-up plays an important role in insuring the success of this program.



Weighing an infant outside the Supplementary Feeding Center at IRC Clinic V

All of the programs offered by the IRC clinics depend upon a system of community outreach. Health education is one focus. Community health workers give health information talks to refugees in the waiting areas at the clinics. Other training is transmitted over a loudspeaker with a mobile unit that goes through the camp. Others community outreach staff follow up on specific cases to make sure that they understand and are following through on their care. Community outreach workers also interact with the leaders of particular communities to explain and promote health care initiatives.

Domestic resettlement staff will probably want to take note of this particular aspect of the health care system in the camp. The use of community outreach has shown that community acceptance can change the willingness of individuals to enter certain programs. For example, the family planning clinic of IRC previously had almost no clients because community outreach efforts helped establish it as acceptable for the community as a whole. If US staff encounter some initial reluctance of groups to enter certain programs, they might want to identify community leaders and seek to use them as a source to validate these programs in the eyes of the community rather than educating individuals alone.

Somali Bantu clients accessing its services. Now these refugees make up the majority of the program clients because community outreach efforts helped establish it as acceptable for the community as a whole. If US staff encounter some initial reluctance of groups to enter certain programs, they might want to identify community leaders and seek to use them as a source to validate these programs in the eyes of the community rather than educating individuals alone.

### **Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS)**

In my time in Kakuma, I was also able to visit the offices and project sites of a few other implementing partners. Lutheran World Federation (LWF) deals with several of the basic needs of the camp including food distribution, water supply management, and the educational system (with preschool, primary, and secondary schools). LWF also maintains the reception center for new arrivals and deals with a number of conflict resolution issues. In addition to maintaining its own programs, the agency also acts as an umbrella organization for a number of other NGOs in the camp doing smaller-scale, specific projects such as Solar Cookers International (to help eliminate the costs of firewood or coal for refugees) and Right to Play (providing sports therapy to refugee children).

Perhaps the most important programs of LWF in terms of their impact on the future of refugees in the US are the vocational and training programs which it provides to refugees in the camp. The schools for children maintained by LWF, for example, are almost entirely staffed by refugee “incentive teachers”. These refugees are given teacher’s training through LWF that they can use in the camp and perhaps build upon in the future. LWF also oversees a number of job skill training programs (through Don Bosco for example) which are available to refugees in the camp. Even if refugees are not able to access these formal programs, local contractors are hired by LWF to construct a lot of infrastructures around the camp including school buildings and the recent security enhancements. These contractors will often hire refugees for the manual labor jobs, providing not only a source of income for them but a chance to have some work experience as well.



Refugee workers hired to help in the construction of a building in the camp

Another organization dealing with a number of special projects around the campsite is Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS). Many of its programs are smaller scale projects that target refugees with special needs. They have a large counseling staff made up of refugees from the camp who have received training to help members of their community deal with traumatic events and to encourage education. Relaxation and alternative therapies (massage, reflexology) are included in counseling techniques for which refugees are trained as well. JRS also runs a day care for refugee children with mental health problems which seeks to improve their health and sensitize parents and communities to their needs. The organization even maintains a small poultry and medicinal plant farm both to provide opportunities for developing project management skills as well as fulfilling some immediate needs of the camp. In all JRS has 160 refugee staff members who represent all communities and languages in the camp. Each employee receives on-the-job training and a certificate of completion.

Of particular importance at JRS are their programs which help women facing problems of domestic abuse, rape, forced marriage, and child abduction or single mothers needing special support. The organization provides a temporary “safe haven” shelter for women-at-risk until solutions of conflict resolution or resettlement.

The women are given projects to do such as embroidery, gardening, and cooking. Similarly the mothers’ program seeks to provide education for teen and single mothers who have dropped from school. Often rejected or abused by their own communities, the mothers at the center can gain skills like beadwork (an income generating activity to avoid them providing sexual favors for money) or counseling and massage which could lead to future employment with the organization. The ultimate goal of the program is to encourage these women to go back to school or enter technical training.



Women in the JRS mother’s program practicing beadwork

Though the programs of LWF and JRS may not represent the majority of refugees in the camp, the programs and training they provide will make quite a difference for those individuals who receive them and are resettled in the US. Not only do refugees gain particular (and hopefully transferable) skills, they also have exposure to systems of employment and job training that are more similar to what they might receive in the US. Resettlement staff might have an easier time providing job orientations and transitioning these refugees into US jobs for this reason. The emphasis placed on education found in these organizations will be helpful as well, especially in addressing the needs of women for whom their exposure to income generating activities might have been the first in their lives.

Domestic resettlement staff will thus want to be aware of all of the kinds of training programs available in the camps and if the refugees with whom they interact have passed through them. This process may require probing to see what experiences the individuals had in the camp and inquiring if they received some kind of certificate. (Though they may have participated in these programs, refugees may not think to mention this fact in a new context---particularly for women at JRS for whom training might have been received under difficult circumstance.) Resettlement staff can also help refugees during employment orientations to understand how to market their particular experience. If necessary, there may also be ways to verify certain experiences. LWF keeps records of all incentive teachers, for example, and the director noted that they are able to verify a certificate presented by a student via email.

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## The Somali Bantu

Though not the stated focus of my exchange, the Somali Bantu figured largely in the discussions and encounters that I had throughout the trip. This fact is hardly surprising given that preparations for their resettlement were at the forefront of resettlement issues at the time. All the agencies and organizations in Nairobi mentioned some of the special programs and changes that have taken shape in the past year for the group. Being that IOM is intimately involved in the lives of the Somali Bantu group in the camps, my time in Kakuma also centered around the group and the issues that they face. For this reason, I was able to spend time not only learning about the services available to the Somali Bantu but also to interact with the Somali Bantu refugees themselves in the environment in which they live.

From all of these encounters, I not only gained some additional knowledge of the Somali Bantu culture but, as I saw the various programs through which they will pass, I was also provided with a better understanding of what level of exposure to modern living the Somali Bantu might have upon their arrival. Below are descriptions of many of the areas in which I learned some interesting facts. With each description, I also offer suggestions of what domestic resettlement staff might want to be prepared to address in orientation and trainings for the group based on those observations.

### **General camp life**

Life in Kakuma camp for the Somali Bantu offers very little. The environment itself is rather harsh. Most of the Somali Bantu in Kakuma arrived only in the past year from Dadaab camp (since it was not safe enough for processing) and are thus in an entirely new area of the camp with shelters constructed specifically for them. For this reason, the area is particularly dry and barren compared to older parts of the camp where long-staying refugees have at least grown some trees and vegetation.

Like other refugees in the camp, the Somali Bantu receive regular food rations---a mix of grains and oils. It was noted, however, that most other refugees are able to supplement this diet with the money they receive from friends and family overseas. The Somali Bantu do not have access to any such extra resources. Moreover, to cook this food they must use coal or firewood that they buy or barter from the

local population---sometimes trading part of the little food they have to eat, noted one Bantu woman. (Because fuel is a significant source of income for those populations, it would cause many conflicts and problems if the Bantu attempted to gather their own.)

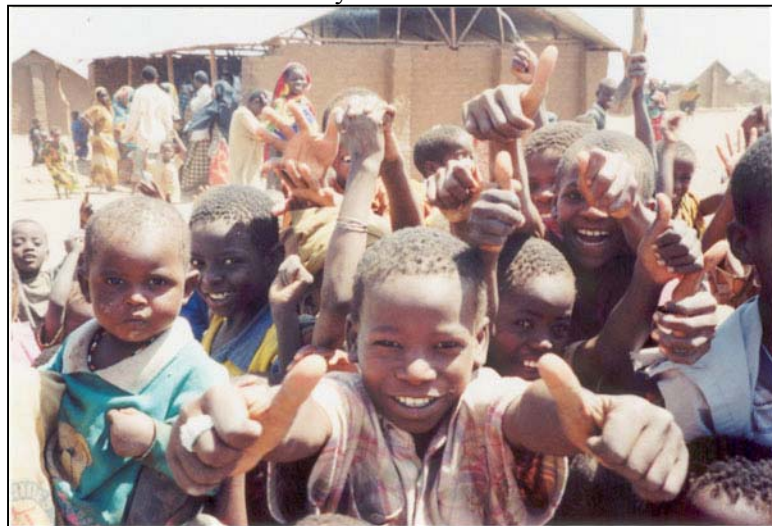
Also like other refugees in the camp, the Bantu live in small mud-brick, tin-roof homes. The homes are empty inside save for a mat for sleeping and some utensils for cooking. Most of the Somali Bantu had obtained bright cloths to decorate and to partition of a sleeping area from the rest of the home. Many even make their own bricks from the ground around them in order to build additions to the home. Water for drinking and washing is collected in plastic containers from central bore holes. In between rows of houses are walled-off latrines which I was told are kept fairly well-cleaned and sanitized. Also scattered around the camp area are some class/meeting rooms, a mosque, and notice boards.



In the Somali Bantu section of Kakuma III

We were told that the Somali Bantu men spend much of their mornings looking for opportunities to supplement their food rations by seeking work and interaction with others in the general areas of the camp. (As I mentioned in a previous section, some agencies or contractors in the camp will hire refugees for short-term work). Based on the comments of several individuals, however, it seems that such opportunities are not that plentiful. The Somali Bantu women seem to rarely venture out from the camp environment and instead maintain much of the household area.

One of the most immediately striking aspects of entering the Somali Bantu area of the camp, however, is the number of children. Bantu women often marry at a very young age and have quite a large number of children at very close intervals. There are three births a day among the Somali Bantu



There are quite a number of young children among the Somali Bantu

population of Kakuma, meaning that the majority of the children are very young. In the camp, the children run around the living areas *en masse*, only somewhat supervised by whichever adults happen to be present. Though there was one site which was identified as a school building, I was told that it was not being used at the time. It did not seem, therefore, that most of the Somali Bantu children are getting much formal education. I did see one group of children sitting with an older teenager reviewing some English language phrases in an informal gathering.

All of these facts will have a significant impact on the Somali Bantu and the ways that service providers in the US assist them. It has been pointed out that the Somali Bantu will need intensive orientation to all aspects of a modern home from the start. After twelve years

of living in a camp environment described above, most of the refugees have experience with little else. This need would include an introduction to food preparation and nutrition since the groups will probably not have much basis for that. One of the most significant challenges that the Somali Bantu families will face, however, stems from the size of their families and the fact that most of their children are very young. The typical family might not have an older teenager to look after children, and Somali Bantu parents may be dealing for the first time with an environment in which there is not a larger community to care for their children. They will need to be provided orientation on how to watch for the general safety of children and instruction as to what kinds of child-rearing skills are appropriate for the US environment. (I observed individuals threatening unruly children with sticks or scattering a boisterous group by throwing stones at their feet.) Moreover, resettlement providers will need to plan for how to deal with such large numbers of young children at one time. Everything from transportation (several children in one family may need car seats) to the appropriate use of diapers (the Somali Bantu do not normally use them and have had difficulty understanding the concept in some cases) will present significant challenges. Without having had access to schooling or formal instruction, many of the children will probably need an extended orientation to the school environment as well.

### **Somali Bantu Elders**

One of the more interesting visits in the camp was with the Somali Bantu leadership and board of elders. This meeting was facilitated by Abdullahi Ahmed, a young Bantu man who is the secretary general (a kind of community liaison) for the group. With the help of UNHCR, the Bantu have a written constitution that delineates a very clear structure of leadership in the camps. The primary leaders are the chairman or paramount chief, a vice-chairman, and a vice-chairlady. Under these is a board of representatives or council of elders (with one men's group and one women's group---only the men's group met with us during the visit). These individuals also lead several committees which address the areas of health, water, shelter, conflict, security, and children in the Bantu area of the camp. This board of elders will then bring their needs and concerns to the various agencies and organizations in the camp in regular meetings.

All of these leaders are chosen by the community through representatives. Each group (based on original village/town groups) chooses one person to represent them in a vote to elect the leaders. I asked the elders if they planned to carry this structure with them to the United States. They emphasized that this form of community leadership is intended for the camp alone and will dissolve once all individuals go to America. Their chairman noted that the group has not discussed any certain plans for organizing in the US because they want to wait and see how things are there. However, he did express interest in knowing more about how refugees form themselves into community organizations since they hope to do so after sufficient time has passed.



A meeting of the men of the Somali Bantu elder leadership

As can be seen, the Somali Bantu have had a lot of ownership in the organization of their community in the camps. The visit also highlighted several points that I found interesting as a case manager. Many reports have noted that, unlike other groups in Somalia who rely almost exclusively on a

clan system for group identity, the Somali Bantu seem to place more emphasis on the places from which people come. That their leadership structure in the camp is based on village of origin underscores this principle. This explains why the Bantu are being resettled according to village groups and may be an important point for US trainers to keep in mind when explaining ideas of community and individual independence or equality in the American setting. It also seems that the Somali Bantu will be seeking information on how to organize themselves once in the United States, so resettlement staff might want to be prepared to offer advice and orientation in this area as well.

One particularly telling interaction involved a questions posed by one of the Somali Bantu elders. After giving a lengthy preamble, the elder expressed concern that many of the Somali Bantu who had already left for the United States had written back that the planes on which they flew had had many empty seats. Why, he asked, were these places not filled with Somali Bantu? The answer to this question was rather straightforward: The US government does not allow more than thirty-five refugees to enter on a commercial flight at one time. We explained this fact to the group and were quite surprised by their effusive thanks for the answer. They stressed that they would share this information with the whole community who would be very happy to hear this response since it showed that the US government was following a rule and had not simply overlooked their needs, presumably the assumption that they would have otherwise drawn.

It was quite interesting to note how willing the elders were to accept a circumstance once assured that there was a rule being followed. What struck me most about the interaction, however, was that it would have been very easy for the group to have this question answered prior to our visit. The secretary general, who interacts freely with the IOM staff, could have casually asked one of the workers about this particular question and received the answer. It almost seemed that the group had instead waited, perhaps believing that such questions should come from the leadership in a more formal setting. If this is the case, this manner of interaction could have important implications for how needs and questions are communicated once the Somali Bantu arrive to the US. Individuals might expect the elders or leaders in their community to pass along important information about their needs, so agencies would want to identify these individuals and try to maintain an open dialogue. At the least, resettlement staff might need to encourage the Somali Bantu with whom they interact and provide training to feel confident to ask questions in the more casual and one-on-one environment that they will encounter with case managers and others.

## **Health issues**

During the meeting with the head of medical screenings at the IOM compound, a good deal was said about the Somali Bantu and their health condition. There are many particular needs which the Somali Bantu present as a population that differ from the other groups in Kakuma camp. Unlike many of the African populations, for example, the HIV prevalence of the Somali Bantu is almost 0%. However, the HIV infection rate is probably low only because the Somali Bantu are a rather closed community. This very characteristic could also contribute to a fast spread of the disease if it were introduced. This fact is highlighted by the rather high syphilis rate (9%) among the Bantu. Another particular health issue among the Bantu is the surprisingly high amount of hypertension among the community as a whole. The doctor noted that no one knows why this figure is so high, and that domestic health staff will want to look for explanations of this trend rather than simply treating the symptoms in individuals.

By far the most significant health problem of the Somali Bantu, however, is their poor nutrition status. As mentioned above, the Bantu do not have the capacity to supplement their rations in the camp. As a result, the population as a whole is extremely undernourished. They make up the vast percentage of individuals accessing the supplemental nutrition and feeding programs of the camp and will probably continue to have health issues related to malnutrition through their arrival to the United States. Resettlement staff will want to be prepared for this particular need as well as the need to provide some

training about proper nutrition and the appropriate foods to eat to ease into better health in their first weeks in the US.

The medical director also had comments about the mental health of the Somali Bantu, noting above all that the morale of the group is very low. They are very likely to have a low self-esteem and may lack the willingness to assert themselves or ask for things they need. (The doctor had even seen some individuals who did not speak up when overlooked in food distribution and instead went without.) While he noted that this trait means that Somali Bantu are very reliable and up front when asked questions about their medical conditions and such, resettlement staff will also need to spend time helping the Bantu build up their self-confidence and orienting them to the importance of voicing their questions and concerns. In the meantime, domestic staff will need to learn how to probe pertinent issues and encourage individuals to share their needs. The director also confirmed that the Bantu do channel many of their questions through their leadership.

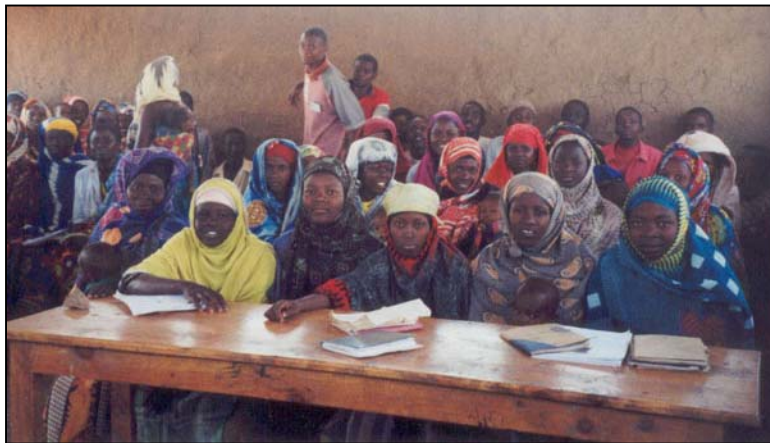
### **Opportunities for cultural orientation**

One of the main questions that resettlement agencies providing training and orientation for the Somali Bantu will have is regarding what level of exposure the group has already had to life in the United States prior to arrival. There are a number of venues in which the Somali Bantu might receive some such training. Some of these are highlighted below along with suggestions of ways in which US cultural orientation staff might build upon this experience.

#### *Literacy Classes*

One of the principal Somali Bantu activities in the camp is attending the literacy classes funded and administered by IOM. These classes were created specifically for the Bantu population since the vast majority of the group is uneducated and preliterate. Classes take place in open-air classrooms throughout the Bantu section of the camp. IOM contracts IRC to run these classes using some hired staff and a number of refugee incentive teachers. Most of the literacy teachers, therefore, are older youth from the Somali Bantu community who learned English in school camps in Kakuma or Dadaab. Writing paper and pens are supplied to each student, and lessons include repetition of lines, role-play, and writing assignments.

Almost all the Somali Bantu adults attend these literacy classes. Since the women stay nearby as the men go out to look for work possibilities in the mornings, they make up the majority of the classes.

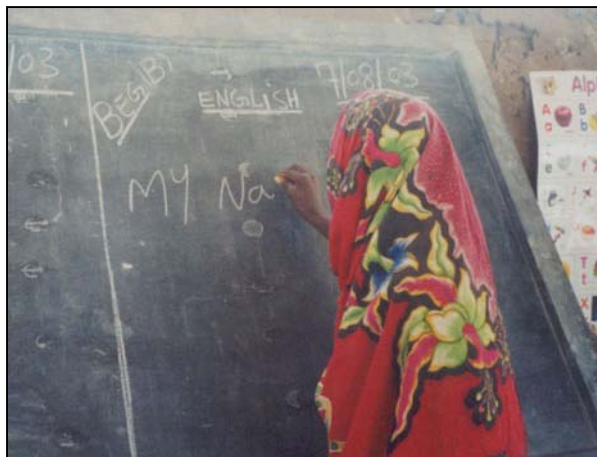


Somali Bantu students in literacy classes

All of the Bantu seem to place a high priority upon the learning they receive, however, and it can be seen that they are very eager and able to learn. One teacher noted that most of the students who had started classes four months prior did not even know how to hold a pen at the beginning. At the time of my visit, these individuals were now able to write letters, numbers, and read basic words or phrases from the board.

What sets these classes apart, however, is that they are not focused on language acquisition. Instead, they are an important tool for cultural orientation and perhaps the first

preparation for life in the United States that many of the Somali Bantu receive. Beyond the concept of writing itself, the lessons center around basic forms of interaction (such as greetings or phone conversations) and identifying/reading signs (PUSH, PULL, MEN, WOMEN, etc.). I observed a number of classes using reading examples that touched on the areas of greetings, safety and housing, arithmetic and money, signs, and job seeking. Such lessons require an explanation of the settings and circumstances in which the examples appear, giving the students an important introduction to American life. One complication in this process is that, unlike the standard CO classes, most of the literacy teachers do not have direct knowledge of the US. For this reason, there does have to be a very standard and basic curriculum to help avoid miscommunication. (We observed one teacher giving a literal explanation of “restroom” as a place where one takes a nap.) Despite a few such missteps, however, the Somali Bantu are obviously learning a good deal very quickly in the classes. They are receiving a grounding that will put them on track to be ready for both English language and cultural orientation classes once they arrive in the United States.



A Somali Bantu woman writes her name on the board

### *Cultural Orientation Classes*

As with all refugees, the Somali Bantu receive a cultural orientation training following their final approval for US resettlement. However, because the Bantu are coming from a background that is so different from US life and will present such challenges for their resettlement, IOM offers them an even more extensive and detailed orientation. (It should be noted that other refugees in the past have come with the same lack of exposure and expected difficulties in adjustment. Given the scale of resettlement for the Somali Bantu, however, they have attracted particular attention and funding for special projects.) The Bantu orientation includes an expanded curriculum which adds the topics of literacy/numeracy, dates and times, food, and hygiene/cleanliness. As a result, the Somali Bantu receive a full fifty hours of orientation (as opposed to the normal twenty-five) over a ten day period.

The entire classroom of Kakuma has been fitted with working kitchen and bathroom fixtures since the training of the Bantu began, allowing trainers to demonstrate directly the various aspects of home life that the Somali Bantu will face in the US. Given that cultural orientation training only takes place over a two-week period, one cannot assume that the Bantu have a full and permanent understanding of the appliances which they are shown. However, they are at least able to receive their first true introduction to such conveniences without the immediate pressure or danger of having to use them alone. These demonstrations are important not only for the general introduction they provide, but also because the practical demonstration serves to reveal many underlying misconceptions or gaps in understanding on the part of the students. For example, one trainer noted that upon seeing a demonstration of a flushing a toilet the students proceeded to ask what happens once it gets full! The trainer was able to take the students out back and show how a system of pipes carries the water away. Such an “obvious” topic might have been taken for granted had this question not risen from providing an actual working example. Trainers providing orientation in the US will definitely want to use the same techniques of practical examples and demonstrations for the same reasons. I would also encourage them to seek more examples of these kinds of questions and misunderstandings from overseas staff (via the CAL listserv for example) and to share their experiences with the Somali Bantu with others as well.

### *GOAL/IOM Pre-flight training*

Once the Somali Bantu are booked and ready for travel, they are brought down by IOM to the GOAL Accommodation Center in Nairobi which was described in previous sections. They will stay in these accommodations for about a week prior to their departure. Though only for a short period, I believe this stay provides yet another important point of exposure for the Somali Bantu because they will have first hand experience with certain aspects of modern living for perhaps the first time. At the center, the Bantu are sleeping in actual beds (bunk-style) and are given toiletries to use (toothbrush, toothpaste). They participate in the cooking for the center and thus encounter a wider range of foods. They have access to running water (though it should be noted that the bathroom facilities contain standing-style or “Turkish” flush toilets and are thus not quite what they will encounter in the US.) They also may receive new kinds clothing; IOM and USRP provide warmer clothes for the Bantu to wear since their normal clothes would be too cool for travel. All of these experiences will help contribute to their understanding of modern living by at least building a basis for comprehension. The director of GOAL agreed with this observation and expressed her wish that the Bantu could stay at GOAL for lengthier periods of time in order to have a longer-term preparation for resettlement.

Another important aspect of the stay at GOAL is the opportunity for a pre-departure orientation. This orientation reviews two key aspects of the initial CO training in detail: the flight to America and the importance of hygiene. This review at GOAL was first used for the “Lost Boys” and was recognized as an important need for the Somali Bantu as well. It is provided to a group of refugees who are scheduled to travel together on a flight.

I observed one of these orientations which was taught in Somali by an IOM trainer. The session began with the identification of any participants who spoke English or Swahili. These refugees would serve as leaders to assist IOM staff members on the flight. (All Bantu flights are accompanied to the port of entry. The person accompanying the flight also sits in on this training.) The trainer also made note of how many of the refugee women had very small children. Thereafter, the refugees received a detailed and hands-on explanation of what they would experience before and during their flight to the US. The trainer had an entire array of objects to demonstrate everything from food trays to oxygen masks. One obviously important point in this training was



A group of Somali Bantu girls help prepare food at the GOAL Center



An IOM staff member explains the use of the airplane seatbelt in a pre-departure training session

about hygiene on the plane. It included a demonstration on how to diaper a child as well as another demonstration of the use of a toilet. The second part of the review orientation focused on hygiene and cleanliness. Again actual objects were used such as deodorant and shampoo.

The small level of exposure that the Somali Bantu receive in their time at GOAL is obviously not enough to say that they will be ready to live on their own in a modern dwelling. I do believe it offers a framework upon which their understanding can build. One caveat, however, is that the Somali Bantu may not automatically make the connection between the two experiences. Many people do not realize how much the ability to make an intuitive leap between two inherently similar but outwardly different concepts depends upon education and experience. Therefore resettlement staff will want to help encourage the Somali Bantu in making these kinds of connections and may need to point out the similarities and differences between experiences in the US and what they encountered before.

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## **Conclusion**

My experience with the Cultural Orientation Trainers Exchange was an incredible opportunity to gain a better understanding of the lives of refugees overseas and to see the kinds of cultural orientation training which they receive. I hope this report conveys some of that information and encourages domestic resettlement staff to think critically about ways to enhance the orientation they provide to newly arriving refugees. The secondment also provided the opportunity to receive some pre-departure training regarding stateside processing and the larger picture of both domestic resettlement and overseas orientation. This training included visits with various refugee agencies in Washington DC (PRM, RPC, etc.) as well as informational sessions with members of CAL and the other secondees. The information from these meetings became very useful when acting with the agency counterparts overseas.

More than just a two-week experience, the exchange allowed me to create some lasting connections with CO staff in Kenya. I have already been able to share additional program information with IOM Nairobi staff following my return and have received information from them as well. Moreover, because Atlanta is the principal port of entry for the Somali Bantu coming into the United States, I will have continued personal contacts with the trainers as they pass through the city as escorts. Two IOM trainers have already been able to visit my organization's office for this reason. The preparations for the exchange also revealed the need to create some kind of network of connections for resettlement and orientation trainers in the US as well.

While this report will serve as one important avenue of conveying the information that I gained as part of the exchange, I will also be seeking other opportunities to share my experiences. I have already been able to present some of this information at a meeting of the Georgia Refugee Advisory Council which consists of representatives from the state of Georgia, area volags, refugee serving agencies, and other citizens interested in refugee issues. I have also been heavily participating in the collaborative planning for the resettlement of the Somali Bantu in Georgia. I am scheduled to present at a gathering of refugee service providers about some of the observations regarding orientation for the Somali Bantu highlighted in this report.

I believe that the benefits of this exchange will continue to grow over time, and I hope that many others will have the opportunity to participate in similar exchanges in the future. The more that the perspectives of domestic resettlement staff and overseas CO trainers are brought together, the more useful both programs will be for the refugees involved. While written reports and contacts are important, the chance for US staff to glimpse the environment and experiences of refugees overseas and share it with their colleagues has much more impact. I would definitely encourage any resettlement staff who are interested to pursue an application to CO Trainers Exchange program.

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