

Report

Can We Learn to Live Together Peacefully?

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One of the challenges of the early decades of the 21st century will be living together peacefully on a crowded planet. Modern technology and population increases have brought different cultures together on a scale never experienced before. The past does not give us a good model of how to do this peacefully, with war and colonisation, leading to the strong dominating the weak regardless of need or rights, being the usual pattern when different groups met on common ground. In fact it is this historical legacy that is one of the major stumbling blocks to a peaceful future. The events following the break-up of the Soviet Union, the ongoing wars between neighbours of centuries in every continent show that although in theory we are more civilised in the twenty first century, force is still a common way to address any conflict. This, with environmental degradation and overpopulation, has led to unprecedented numbers of refugees and cultural and racial conflict in many countries.

As a small isolated country in the South Pacific, New Zealand has not had to face the issue of large numbers of refugees. We have seen the movement of the boat people of South East Asia south to Australia. This migration has been relatively easy to control because of the extremely harsh physical nature of northern Australia and the boats are rarely seaworthy enough to reach our shores.

The ease of travel, globalisation and work opportunities also have meant that people tend to move further and more often than they did in

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the past. Television has made the whole world seem a familiar place and there are very few countries about which it is difficult to get information. Migration is no longer such a major step as modern technology allows easier communication with family and friends back home. In a crisis even the most remote places are only days away, not months or years.

Throughout human history, the explorers, adventurers, job seekers and refugees have set up communities away from their home culture. These communities adapted to their new conditions and changed, but it is clear that the ties to their home culture can survive many generations. In a less crowded world the effects of disputes between groups tended to be more localised and were often relieved by one group moving away. This is almost impossible today, as there is rarely any suitable empty land available.

This more intimate mixing of very different cultures in crowded areas have changed the shape of communities around the world. In New Zealand, our isolation gave rise to a culture determined by the migration of people from the United Kingdom who in a very short time dominated the indigenous Maori culture. In the later half of the twentieth century with changing immigration policies, there has been an influx of migrants from the Pacific Islands and Asia and the whole nature of many communities have changed. This is very evident in Auckland, the largest New Zealand city and the usual point of entry for new migrants.

The influx of non-English groups and a wider recognition of the rights of the indigenous people have led to a subtle shift in thinking about shape of community in New Zealand. In the past there was an expectation that the Maori and any newcomers with a different culture would be assimilated into a homogeneous New Zealand culture which would be mainly determined by an English heritage. More recently there has been a resurgence of Maori culture as with indigenous groups worldwide, and new immigrant groups have also established communities within New Zealand. It has become popular to speak of New Zealand as a multi-cultural society.

Although "multi-cultural societies" have been talked about for some decades, the necessary features of sustainable multi-cultural communities are often not recognised or practised. Major issues of governance, education, health, and community infrastructure are rarely addressed and often not even acknowledged as issues. Many of the accepted norms of monocultural communities are not helpful or viable in multi-cultural communities.

At the recent 4th National conference of the New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils the process called "assimilation" as practised in the past was deemed as unacceptable. A process named "integration" was preferred for the future. The aim of the conference was to develop policy in a participatory manner to promote the ideals of integration. A key assumption was that the new immigrant is both proud to be a citizen of their adopted country and proud of their particular cultural heritage. This implies that there is a freedom to express their cultural heritage in their new home.

The conference was designed to develop policies in six key areas, immigration and resettlement, health and housing, and education and employment, by involving the participants in workshops brainstorming and prioritising the issues that needed addressing for successful outcomes for new migrants. Perhaps the key issue identified was that for successful settlement there needed to be a welcoming host community. If there was no welcome and a readiness for newcomers to be accepted it was very difficult for any education, work, or housing programme to succeed.

The experiences of migrants who choose to migrate and are accepted in welcoming host countries are very different to those of refugees. Certainly all the recent reports and publicity indicate that the plight of an ever growing number of refugees is getting worse. The objective of the recent international scenario creation project sponsored by the International Catholic Migration Commission was to force critical thinking about crucial questions concerning refugee resettlement. The project brought together fifteen dedicated professionals in refugee work and encouraged them to think beyond the every-day problems of their work. The final report is a series of five scenarios how refugees might be treated in very differing world futures. Each scenario projects into the future to somewhere between 2010 and 2015.

The scenarios are developed in some detail in the report and the overviews given are

The 1951 Convention: More of the Same

The current refugee response regime continues. Further incremental steps are taken by the world's more powerful nations to inhibit undesired international migration, enabled by ever-more sophisticated technology.

Mitigation

A future beset by local and regional conflicts in which the world's major powers are pressured - by humanitarian concerns as well as by self interest - to take actions to mitigate the impact of conflict and to limit the need for migration and resettlement.

No Borders

The scenario considers the likely effects of aging in the industrialized world, and envisions a future in which the need for skilled labour in these countries overrides humanitarian concern. The borders of the developed world are open. Those with skills are resettled easily while the developing world tries to limit emigration to deal with the ever-increasing brain drain.

The Fortress

The scenario imagines a world in which fears of terrorism, epidemic disease and job loss combine with tremendous advances in technology to enable the powerful to build walls around the industrialised world. Unwanted migrants are kept outside the walls of the regional fortresses and resettlement is a relic of a more humanitarian 20th century.

The Big Chill

The scenario imagines a Europe devastated by climate change and considers the implications and effects on the powerful and the poor of the need to resettle hundreds of millions of people in still habitable areas of the globe.

My assessment of these scenarios is that some are plausible; some may be more probable than we care to believe. Are any of them preferred? We leave that to you to decide.

For agencies involved with migrants and refugees the report is an invaluable resource when considering long-term future plans.