Sophie Mire
Poverty Studies

International Rescue Committee Reflection

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is an amazing organization that has saved the lives of so many of the world’s poor that live in conflict areas. At the IRC location in Atlanta, Georgia, the number of countries represented is simultaneously impressive, staggering, and alarming, in that it reveals how widespread the refugee demographic is in the world. Burmese, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Afghani, Iraqi, Sudanese, Congolese, Somali, and Haitians are brought from harm to home and through the IRC, are able to utilize social services to enable them to begin to start a new, and what those oblivious (including myself 3 months ago) to the situation might consider to be an “easier” life in the United States.

Resettling refugees is perhaps one of the most difficult endeavors one might ever take on in the social justice arena because of the vast amount of changes a refugee faces within a short period of time. Being uprooted and transplanted into a foreign land, a refugee is expected to attend school for 7 hours a day (many of them do not even know how to hold a pencil), learn English, secure a job and become financially independent, all while still raising a family. The majority of the refugee populations are single mothers and so this uprooting is not only disruptive to the family life, but it is also overwhelming. Many of the clients have post traumatic stress disorder as a result of witnessing death, surviving torture, or being victim to rape, but seeing a counselor is too expensive and quite frankly, the women do not have time for it, as they are attending class, caring for the children, and searching for a job.
I gained quite a bit from the summer internship. Firstly, working with the refugees certainly tested my patience. Patience is one quality that I really lack and am trying to improve upon. I am a very orderly, methodical and organized worker and so working with people who do not understand or have never practiced time management proved challenging to me. Additionally, teaching in the classroom tested my creativity. Each and every problem required maybe six solutions. When a client did not understand a concept, I had to adjust and so this skill was one that I feel like I improved upon in the past ten weeks.

With that being said, I think that one thing that I learned about myself was that this organization, although wonderful, is not something I could do long term. Instead of working to prevent the phenomenon of refugees, we cared for them. Often times, I wish I had been working more on the policy side, advocating against unjust governments who have refugees or improving the U.S. system so that it was not so harsh or demanding on refugees in America. This is certainly not to discredit the work of the International Rescue Committee, who does this work as well. I feel I would have had this experience had I worked at the corporate headquarter office in New York City. It was an invaluable experience, however, in order to show me that my strengths lie in a more corporate setting than in a field office. However, it is imperative to understand, implement, and grow the successes and be able to address the struggles of those that work everyday with the clients in order to be the best policymaker.

Over the last year, I’ve learned something else that I’m not sure how I feel about. I unintentionally, and now unapologetically favor Haitian clients. My first exposure to Haiti was when I was 13 or so and I feel like I am a sponge for Haiti. Everything I learned, I tried to find an application to Haiti. Even on my study abroad experience in South Africa,
Namibia, and Botswana, I did the same thing. I think because of that, I would have enjoyed an organization that works exclusively with Haitians. I did enjoy hearing from the stories of the women and men from Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia, but for some reason and I cannot really verbalize or articulate it, I still feel such a strong connection to my frè ak sè (brothers and sisters) in Haiti. Perhaps it was because I could identify with them and I’ve seen first hand their struggle. It does however cause great alarm because I worry that I will not be able to break away from Haiti. Is it possible to devote an entire life to one country? Most social justice greats expand beyond one population. Do I need to do the same and if so, how can I, when I really do not have the desire to do so?

Additionally I found it difficult to separate myself from my work and not let my emotions show in front of the clients. I found it incredibly difficult to be firm with the clients. Often, I wanted to hold their hand through the process but the IRC’s policy is strict professionalism. We offer a service and it is up to the clients to take advantage of it. We cannot “baby” them because it will not help in the long run. When the clients did not attend class, I had to report it, even if they had a legitimate reason. I eventually learned that by being soft, I was doing them no favor. Even though it was extremely difficult, it made me a better employee. Did it make me a better person? I do not know. It is complicated when the professional “you” contradicts the moral “you”. Which you supersedes the other?

Overall I would highly, highly recommend the IRC as a internship site and would love the opportunity to work with refugee populations again, especially if it were dealing with the policy side of refugee immigration. This internship has really sparked an interest in legal work, something I said I would never consider and it even caused me to take the
LSAT. I look forward to learning more about the uneven and demanding expectations for refugees in the country in hopes of resolving some of these issues in a policy environment.