

Cultural Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics  
Overseas CO Program Highlight – 2008

**Groups in East and Sub-Saharan Africa**

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**Background**

Church World Service/Overseas Processing Entity Nairobi, Kenya (CWS/OPE) provides Cultural Orientation (CO) to U.S.-bound refugees aged 15 years and above throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Classes are held for urban refugees at the CWS/OPE Nairobi offices, and other trainings are held in various refugee camps and cities throughout the region. The caseload is extremely diverse by nationality, ethnicity, language, education, and living conditions. Training is conducted in refugees' mother tongues (Kiswahili and Somali) where possible, while interpreters are contracted for languages such as French, Oromo, Amharic, Tigrinya, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, and various Sudanese dialects. In FY2008, CWS/OPE CO staff will travel to Dadaab and Kakuma, Kenya; Kibondo, Tanzania; Kigali, Rwanda; Lusaka, Zambia; Harare, Zimbabwe; Addis Abbaba, Ethiopia; Khartoum, Sudan; and Kampala, Uganda.

**Classes and Materials**

CO consists of three 6-hour training days, covering a 15-topic curriculum with substantial emphasis on the role of the resettlement agency, cultural transition, and employment. Methods and materials used depend on the characteristics of the refugee groups, but information is generally disseminated through videos and participatory activities like role plays, group discussions, debates, question and answer sessions, and dramatization.

The classroom walls at the Nairobi office have posters and pictures that illustrate key aspects of the CO curriculum for the urban refugees. The majority of the camp-based refugees have never had a formal job or formal housing arrangements, and the temporary shelters in refugee camps are the only housing environments they have experienced for many years. Topics such as housing, hygiene, and employment are therefore emphasized for these populations, who have very little exposure to the basic aspects of U.S. living. Realia are particularly helpful for these trainings, as seen in the response to the model kitchen and bathroom used at the training site in Kakuma Refugee Camp.

The Center for Applied Linguistics' *Welcome to the United States* video and guidebook (in the English, French, Arabic, and Somali versions) are useful tools that supplement classroom discussion on various subjects. In addition, the CWS/OPE *CO Student Workbook* serves both as a summary of important CO messages and as a notebook allowing students to take notes during training and for use after resettlement. Other important teaching aides include U.S. driver's licenses, I-94 cards, medical cards, debit cards, Social Security cards, lease agreements, and job application forms, all of which are displayed during sessions.

**Featured Caseloads by Location**

**Nairobi, Kenya:** Classes are held at the CWS/OPE CO office in Nairobi, which has six classrooms with the capacity to train more than 100 individuals simultaneously. Classes typically consist of 18 – 24 participants (generally Somalis), depending on family size and processing urgency. During the current fiscal year, CWS/OPE has conducted CO classes for approximately 550 individuals to date.

## **Living Conditions**

Approximately 100,000 refugees live in Nairobi. A large percentage of these refugees live in the Eastleigh area of Nairobi. The government encampment policy requires refugees to stay in remote camps resulting in many urban refugees not being officially recognized. Most Nairobi-based refugees live in apartments that have electricity, plumbing, and, occasionally, modern appliances. Many own shops and small business enterprises. Remittances from relatives in the United States have made a substantial contribution to their livelihoods. As in many parts of the world, there is a negative perception of the refugees by the host community due to stereotypes.

## **Characteristics During CO and Considerations for Domestic Resettlement**

Many Nairobi-based refugees have family in the United States; they typically have a greater awareness of the resettlement process and are better acquainted with CO subjects such as U.S. culture, law, politics, employment, and the resettlement process than other refugee groups. In comparison to camp-based refugees, there is a greater balance with regard to participation from both men and women. Classroom discussion involves active debate as well as question and answer sessions. Common fears regarding resettlement include concerns about cold weather, terrorism, anti-Muslim sentiment, religious and cultural intolerance, and language barriers.

Most of the urban youth regularly attend school organized by community groups and are very eager to continue their education once they arrive in the United States. Most have access to community health clinics at subsidized costs. Most adults would like to apply their skills as small business owners toward similar opportunities in the United States.

## **Tanzania**

In Tanzania, CO classes are held in Kibondo for all refugees, mainly located at the three camps of Ngara, Kasulu, and Kanembwa. Currently, the group receiving cultural orientation is the “1972 Burundians.” Cultural orientation classes typically consist of between 18 and 30 individuals. In the current fiscal year, CWS/OPE Nairobi has conducted cultural orientation for approximately 940 individuals to date.

## **Living Conditions and General Characteristics**

The 1972 Burundians are subsistence farmers who have been living in the refugee camps in Western Tanzania for decades. Living conditions in the camps are harsh, and malnutrition and disease are common. Electricity is not available in the places where the refugees live, although water is circulated at several points in the camps. Many of the refugees in these camps lease small plots of land from the locals, which they farm and share the harvest with plot owners. Most of these individuals have limited exposure to urban living and they are mainly dependent on assistance from humanitarian organizations.

The 1972 Burundians have large families with many young children. They all speak Kirundi but a few understand and speak French and Kiswahili. There are schools for refugee children in the refugee camps, where a Burundian curriculum is taught.

## **Characteristics During CO and Considerations for Domestic Resettlement**

For this group, a more basic introduction of CO is necessary due to their low education levels and limited exposure to urban/modern living. The students are unfamiliar with the basic aspects of life in the United States such as housing, education, and employment, but are especially eager to learn what it takes to succeed. Common fears regarding resettlement include concerns about: employment, care for the elderly, school for the children and adults, assistance duration, language barriers, types of housing, and discrimination. Please note: A direct correlation between instances of alcohol abuse and gender-based violence has been observed.

**Dadaab, Kenya:**

There is a population of over 150,000 refugees (predominantly Somali, but with some Ethiopians and Sudanese refugees as well) living at three camps on the outskirts of Dadaab. These camps—Hagedera, Ifo, and Dagahaley—comprise what is known as “Dadaab Refugee Camp.” The house structures are made of mud and sticks, and temperatures are regularly above 100<sup>0</sup> F. There is a large presence of humanitarian aid agencies that provide water, health care, and community services. Most of the youth attend school up to age 15.

**Characteristics During CO and Considerations for Resettlement**

The students are mostly unfamiliar with basic aspects of life in the United States. Gender differences are evident in CO classes: Men typically participate more than the women. Trainers often need to encourage the women to actively participate in class. Common fears regarding resettlement include concerns about religious freedom in the United States, weather, family reunification, and travel overseas. Refugees appear eager to travel back to Dadaab Refugee Camp after resettlement.