



## North east of England



ማክበራሰብ ኤርትራውያን ሰግናዊ ምብራቅ አንግሊዝ  
الجالية الإرتريا في شمال شرق إنجلترا

### **Eritrean Community Northeast- Governance**

The Eritrean community Northeast is one of the first RCOs established in the Northeast region. It was formally established in late 2002, in response to the government's asylum seekers dispersal system started in the year 2000.

Initially the idea of setting up a project to support fellow refugees and asylum seekers came about from few key individual's activities who are asylum seekers themselves and who shared a similar vision.

We would like to discuss the impact of not having stable governance on the development of an RCO and to share some of the practical steps we have taken to improve stable and transparent governance for the benefit of our members.

#### **Describe what your RCO did, and what came out of this?**

##### Addressing the tension between new and old committee members

Our experience of governance is mostly related to the mistrust between outgoing committee members and newly elected committee. This mistrust has arisen because of

1. Existing perception of newly elected committee about management style and spending by the outgoing committee.
2. The incoming committee not fully understanding the extent of their powers
3. Some new committee's having a different motivation for their election other than the advancement of the organisation's core aims.

Usually when the outgoing committee's work is not acknowledged, some members take this personally and unfortunately persuade their fellow committee members to not cooperate with the new committee including passing on documents that would be crucial for the continuity of the organisation.

As a result of the most common issues (listed below) the organisation introduced a new procedural policy. The policy included the following:

- To reserve at least two seats for people from old committee members at the AGM
- To ensure those who stand for election, do so of their own free will. Each candidate is encouraged to explain how they plan to contribute to the committee.
- The provision of compulsory governance training to all newly elected committee by an outside and independent organisation ( the Basis project has been instrumental in this)

### **What problems and barriers did your RCO face in doing this, and how did you overcome or try to overcome these?**

In most cases, it was clear that newly elected committee had been those who were unhappy with the previous committee and are thus very focused on changing the way things are done.

#### Barriers and obstacles to better governance

Some of the issues identified over the years between committees in different terms or / and individual members include the following, in no particular order of severity

- The old committee looking down on the new committee
- The old committee refusing to cooperate in terms of advice and transfer of documents etc.
- The new committee blaming the old committee for the 'bad' work of the old committee
- Lack of respect and appreciation of one's work
- Lack of understanding of procedures, paper works and good practice from both sides
- Personality clash and pride
- Lack of commitment and goodwill
- Lack of knowledge of the refugee community sector and
- Lack of knowledge of the organisation's function

#### Effect on time, resources, and activities

The drastic consequences of misunderstanding between newly elected management committee and previous one is not only the amount of time and resources wasted unnecessarily, but also the huge impact it has on the members when the development and activities of the organisation is on standstill state.

#### Encouraging commitment to procedures

A number of procedures have been put in place to try and overcome of the issues; however the main challenge remains to be that the newly elected management committee have to adhere to it. One of the biggest challenges is committee member's lack of commitments to training that could potentially resolve a number of the issues.

#### Addressing the gender imbalance

We have often found that most of the people who come forward to be on the committee are men in their 30s, and occasionally an older person or a woman. Traditionally women are less likely to participate in running community organisations in Eritrea and this

pattern has continued here. We realise that young single males are over represented in our community, and in part this accounts for the difference. However we are also aware that there are a number of women who have not come forward to be on the committee.

We think that some of the problems that we have faced could be addressed by involving more women in the committee as we have found that they often approach things in a less confrontational way. One way we are looking at doing this is to set up a women's group for women to come together- we hope that this way they will build mutual support for each other, and also build the confidence to join the management committee of our organisation.

**If your RCO accessed any support to help you with this area of work, describe this support and whether it was helpful to your organisation**

The management committees at various terms sought different help from a wide range of sources, including community based such as independent members and elders, infrastructure organisations (VDAs), mediation services and even legal routes when situations escalated to the wrong directions.

The support that was gained through VDAs seem to have been the most successful as they have the sector's understanding and were able to provide a clear guidance for the way forward.

Depending the real cause of the issue that is whether it was motivated by politics, religion, personalities and ethnicity or just a general misunderstanding of the situation, most cases had reached certain level of understanding.

**What are your key learning points from the work?**

Our key learning from our experience is to try and ensure that enough time and resources is given to instil trust in committee members serving different terms so that cohesive work is carried out to advance the organisation's aims.

Below are some examples of ways we have learnt to do this:

- To ensure that seat/s are reserved to members of the outgoing committee
- To provide joint compulsory training provision on governance good practice to outgoing and newly elected committee members, delivered by an independent Voluntary Development Agency
- The management committee to strive to engage with the general membership in planning activities and events, and reporting and communicating the work they have done as most of the suspicions originate from people not being aware of the actual organisational processes and progress (including fund raising).
- To appoint at least two independent advisers, preferably mainstream service workers who are not from the nationality or ethnic origin of the beneficiary group
- To ensure that there is no outside agenda streamed to the organisation's business and those on the committee must work hard not to entertain any political or religious requests. Individuals will be advised to step down in the

event they are unable to maintain the distinction between their personal interests and the organisation's constitution, objectives and aims.

- We found it helpful to get new committee members to spend more time with the existing policies and procedures and take full ownership of these documents. To that effect new committee to sign a piece of contract to show that they are in full agreement with this and they must adhere to it when in service.

### **What are your tips for other RCOs considering doing something similar?**

#### Minimise the effect of internal conflict

It is sometimes inevitable that conflict will arise between committee members or / and individuals within committees. The most important thing is how you would minimise the risks situations from escalating to higher level that would negatively impact on the development of the organisation.

#### Invest time and energy in training

We recommend that more training is available for committee members, specifically around rights and responsibilities in governance.

#### Build positive relationships among committee members

Committee members must develop the habit of saying thank you to their predecessors and they are there to build upon the work they have started rather than having the spirit of what you have done was not good enough and the sole purpose of our existence is to show you how you should have done it. The danger with the latter is no matter how well the new committee might do, the outgoing committee is less likely to disclose their practical knowledge which could have been easily transferable, and instead the new committee will have to learn everything from scratch.

#### Manage work expectations

It is also crucial that expectations are managed in terms of how much work members expect to see accomplished within a committee term and this could be done by being realistic with what you promise to do as a committee through making your strategic work plan available to members.

#### Record data to demonstrate achievements

It is our experience that any committee provides quite a lot of service to their members but it is not recorded. Recording activity is often considered little help or committee members don't have enough time. It is important that the data is available when reporting back to either outgoing committee or general members. This way the newly elected committee can appreciate the amount of work achieved, and outgoing committee are not judged by amount of funding secured.

© Eritrean Community Northeast 2011

This information has been produced by Eritrean Community Northeast, and was commissioned by the Basis Project, run in partnership by the Refugee Council and Refugee Action, supported by the Big Lottery Fund (BIG). It is not intended to be comprehensive or to provide legal advice. No legal responsibility is attached to the publisher. It can be reproduced free of charge for non-commercial use, but credit must be given to Eritrean Community Northeast, the Basis Project, Refugee Council and Refugee Action.