

## **Working with refugee community organisations (RCOs) 26 November 2009 Brixton Accord**

### **NOTES**

Time: 10:30 am – 4:30 pm  
Number of Attendees: 32

#### **Summary:**

'Working with Refugee Community Organisations', an event jointly organised by London Voluntary Service Council (LVSC), the Refugee Council's Basis project (RC) and the Evelyn Oldfield Unit (EOU), took place on Thursday 26 November 2009 at Brixton Accord. The programme targeted second-tier advisors and development workers, bringing representatives from RCOs together with second-tier advisors to discuss relevant issues of development work with RCOs.

At the event LVSC, RC and EOU gave presentations on the similarities, differences and challenges of working with RCOs compared with development work with other community organisations. Three RCOs also gave presentations on their experiences of working with development workers. Workshops allowed attendees to discuss the challenges of development work with RCOs as well as some tools that can be used to overcome these challenges. Attendees could place anonymous questions on the 'question wall', which were answered and discussed later in the day.

These notes present a record of the day, including the ideas that were introduced by speakers and discussed by attendees. The contents of this report reflect comments made by participants at the event and are not necessarily the views of LVSC, EOU or RC. We would like to thank all those who assisted in organising, delivering and facilitating the event, including speakers from LVSC, RC, EOU, the London Refugee Voice (LRV), Chadian Community, Sudan Women's Association and the Iranian Association.

#### **Opening Remarks:**

Gemma Cossins, the Second Tier Advisors Network (STAN) Officer at LVSC, explained that STAN aims to bring second tier workers together to network and share best practice for the benefit of their work. She noted that 'Working with

Refugee Community Organisations' came about as a result of conversations between LVSC, RC and EOU on development work issues.

The diversity of attendees at the event fed into the differing perspectives present. Gemma set ground rules to provide a safe space for honest discussion.

### **RCOs in London - Overview:**

In order to give a framework for the day and to generate discussion of development work with RCOs, presentations were made by the three facilitating organisations. Tony Nickson from EOU, Stefanie Borkum from LVSC and Fazil Kawani of Refugee Council each outlined some of the similarities and differences between RCOs and other community organisations. These presentations carried over into separate workshop discussions.

Discussions of the similarities and differences of RCOs to other community organisations focused on RCOs in London. The discussions recognised that RCOs are a diverse group of organisations, while also aiming to pull out common themes based on attendees' individual experiences of development work with RCOs. Highlights from the presentations and the ensuing workshop discussions on the similarities and differences of RCOs to other community organisations are summarised below:

#### *Profile of RCOs:*

- Approximately 900,000 migrants live in London, with an estimated 600,000 as refugees.<sup>1</sup>
- London is the most unequal region in many indicators (health and income for example) in the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>
- New challenges and tensions have arisen as new generations in RCO communities emerge.

#### Similarities of RCOs to other community organisations:

- Like other community organisations, RCOs are often set up by organisational leaders responding to issues they face. They tend to be highly-trained and educated community leaders and animators within their communities. These leaders, in light of their own experiences, set out to offer advice and support to those in a similar situation.
- RCOs' users or beneficiaries are often disadvantaged persons facing issues common to other disadvantaged persons including unemployment, underemployment, and difficulties in accessing housing, education and training, and healthcare resources, among other issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Valentine, R. "Refugee and Migrant Community Organisations in 2009: the first in an annual series of reflections on the state of the sector," Evelyn Oldfield Unit, London, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

- Many other community organisations including those focused on mental health and homelessness issues are small, under-resourced and overstretched.
- RCOs, like community organisations generally, face a contract culture and must confront obligations under employment legislation. They have to comply with relevant legislation and require similar policies and procedures
- There is often a blurring of roles and messy relationships between the volunteer leader, paid worker, trustees, and users or beneficiaries in RCOs as well as other community organisations.
- RCOs, like other community organisations, are sometimes encouraged to become formalised by development workers.

Differences between RCOs and other community organisations:

- RCOs face a rapidly changing environment of Asylum and Immigration legislation which aims to curb and limit rights. This changing environment poses unique challenges to RCOs, including dispersal of community members, threat of committing an offence by giving legal immigration advice without a licence, lack of entitlement to benefits leading to destitution and/or work in the exploitative shadow economy, and constant emergencies.
- RCOs are varied and diverse by nature, which mirrors the communities they serve. For example, RCOs may be refugee groups, migrant groups or a combination serving newly arrived or established communities. Fragmentation of groups challenges communication with the wider community and may pose problems in accessing funding.
- A strong sense of belonging and ownership of the organisation exists between users, clients or beneficiaries and RCOs. This sense of belonging creates differing expectations, and may be a barrier to gaining critical feedback from beneficiaries who feel a strong sense of ownership and belonging.
- The process of setting-up and managing an RCO can be more challenging than that required for other community organisations, because of legal issues regarding immigration status and access to resources.
- RCOs face a unique set of demands on their services, given the nature of the communities they serve. Members of these communities often come from conflict-ridden regions and may face a range of health and education issues related to poverty and/or mental health due to stress and disability.
- RCOs have a dual focus: living in London while maintaining deep ties with communities in home countries. As such, earnings of users or beneficiaries may often be remitted to home countries.

- In addition to challenges faced by users or beneficiaries of other community organisations, RCOs also often struggle with language and cultural barriers. These barriers can present problems in good governance and fundraising.
- RCOs tend to take a comprehensive, open-door approach to the advice and support they offer their clients or beneficiaries, which may make their style of work more informal than other community organisations
- The resilience of RCOs is exemplified by their performance within a tough funding environment. Research has found that RCOs benefit from the work of between 2 and 50 volunteers.<sup>3</sup>

#### Challenges of development work with RCOs:

- The professional expectations of the service-led culture in the UK mean that highly-educated and experienced leaders of RCOs are often overlooked. The informal culture of RCO work can conflict with funders' or development workers' expectations and requirements.
- A tension exists between the practical nature of RCO advice and support to communities, and some development workers' approaches which centre on legal compliance and good practice. For example, the legal implications of a community organisation paying cash-in-hand to sessional tutors for supplementary schools illustrates the difference that may exist between an RCO's aims and those of a development worker. Legal compliance, of primary concern to a development worker, may actually undermine an RCO's primary reason for existence. Should development workers merely go along with legislative changes and become semi-police?
- It is important that development workers gain a deeper understanding of the diversity and range of RCOs as well as the resilience these organisations have shown in a tough funding environment.
- The informal approach that many RCOs take can pose problems for effective monitoring and evaluation. It is important that RCOs know and evaluate the work that they do.
- RCOs sometimes appear to offer more services than they are able to manage. Tension may exist between an RCO's ambitious goals and its actual capacity to deliver services.
- RCOs may be isolated because of a lack of resources or prioritisation of networking meetings and events. Both mainstream CVSs and RCOs need to work in partnership to accomplish interrelated goals.

#### **London Refugee Voice Report:**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The London Refugee Voice (LRV) gave a brief presentation on its report, "Strengthening the Voice of Refugee Community Organisations within London's Second-tier Voluntary Sector: Barriers and Opportunities" which discusses RCOs and development work.

LRV is a pan-London membership organisation focused on networking and outreach as well as training for RCOs. The research report is available from the LRV website: [http://www.lrv.org.uk/downloads/Strengthening\\_the\\_Voice\\_report.pdf](http://www.lrv.org.uk/downloads/Strengthening_the_Voice_report.pdf)

### **RCO Experiences:**

Throughout the day, representatives from three RCOs made presentations on their experiences of working with development workers and advisors. The three representatives were Ahamet Hassan from the Chadian Community which was established in 2004, Elizabeth Ajith from the Sudan Women's Association which was established in 1996 and Kaveh Kalantari of the Iranian Association which was established in 1985. These presentations from RCOs at different stages of organisational development offered an insider's perspective on the impact of development work.

All three RCOs had experience of working with development workers in different capacities, including:

- Project development and fundraising
- Policy development
- Training and workshops on wide range of issues
- Needs assessments
- Sign-posting
- Access to resources from different organisations.

The RCO representatives noted that the relationship between RCOs and development workers is a two-way partnership, with each partner having certain responsibilities. Thus, RCOs have certain expectations of development workers and likewise, development workers have expectations of RCOs.

#### *RCOs expect development workers:*

- To have relevant experience and up-to-date knowledge
- To be trustworthy: compliance with confidentiality and data protection obligations
- To display friendliness and empathy: willingness to understand and help meet organisations' needs

#### *Development Workers should expect RCOs:*

- To be proactive: must be committed to doing most of the work
- To provide a reasonable level of quality

Themes that arose in the RCO representatives' presentations were funding support, gender and the importance of volunteers and partnerships. Highlights from their presentations are outlined below:

#### *Funding Support*

- Attracting funding can be difficult where services are directed to a specific sub-group. Fundraising for women-only organisations and services poses a challenge where many funders require a wider base of service users or beneficiaries
- Need for sustainable funding and assistance in attracting new funding and planning for end of specific funding-streams
- Importance of funding: financial management not very useful without having secured finances to be managed
- Often RCOs don't have the time, skills or expertise to deal with fundraising issues, and it would be helpful to obtain help from someone with expertise in this field

#### *Gender – Empowering Women*

- Addressing social exclusion within communities: often, women are marginalised and require specialist support and advice. Important for development workers to be aware of gender concerns.

#### *Volunteer Work*

- Importance of having a pool of volunteers who help to strengthen the progress achieved by RCOs

#### *Partnerships in Effecting Change*

- Network and capacity-building among RCOs is important so that resources can be shared in tackling long-standing problems
- Continual follow-up support is vital. One-off support is limited in usefulness and effectiveness: there is a need for mentorship-style development work
- Important for development workers to meet face-to-face with RCOs and offer practical assistance

### **Workshop Activities:**

The group was split into three sub-groups, each of which tackled three issues, namely: defining RCOs; outlining the similarities and differences between RCOs and other community organisations that might affect development work; and revealing some tools that can be used to overcome the barriers identified in working with RCOs. Below are highlights from the workshop groups, by topic.

#### *Defining RCOs:*

The definition of RCOs is often shifting, given the dynamic and varied nature of the communities they serve, as well as the changing legislative environment impacting upon these organisations. During the workshops, the following issues were raised as being important considerations to coming up with a definition:

- Belief in programme: personal, individual and community involvement
- Often based on direct experience
- Motivated individuals
- Set up for support and advocacy on behalf of community
- Focused on improving lives of community members
- Difficulties faced in setting up, accessing and understanding available information and resources because of language and cultural barriers
- Importance of volunteer work

- Led by representative(s) within refugee community
- Specific to national, regional and/or ethnic identities and cultures
- Diversity: RCOs differ in terms of size, organisational culture and services provided
- Meeting specific needs: by the community, for the community
- Filling in existing gaps: replacing what was lost
- Sense of belonging
- Stable presence in people's lives
- Providing specialist support to refugees
- First point of call
- Networking (support, advice)
- Voice for individual and community
- Individual empowerment
- Wider service to community and society
- Offering support where the government does not
- Space for individual and community development
- Growth depends on demographic and regional factors
- May be informal or formally constituted
- Connotation and stereotypes attributed to 'refugee' can be politically dangerous
- Provide links to home country communities
- Important for integration
- Organic, bottom-up approach and outreach work: user-led?

While "Integration Matters: a National Strategy for Refugee Integration" by the UK Border Agency of the Home Office defines RCOs as: "*organisations run by and for refugees. They provide advice and support, often informally and act as bridges to mainstream services and other local groups,*"<sup>4</sup> it is best to be aware of all debates surrounding the definition of RCOs, some of which are noted above, rather than seeking one single definition.

### **Looking at Ways to Reduce Barriers:**

Each workshop group came up with a list of barriers to development work with RCOs, and then explored some tools that can be used to reduce and possibly overcome these barriers. Each barrier identified is listed with the ideas generated to reduce or overcome it:

#### Organisational Culture: Professional Approach

- Keeping an open-mind and building confidence
- Bringing people together
- One-to-one support and coaching
- Continual mentorship and support
- Recognising different ways to do things
- Achieving quality marks which require professional development and ensure that advisors are trained and qualified
- Development workers must understand work that RCOs do in order to help them develop

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<sup>4</sup> UK Border Agency, "Integration Matters: a National Strategy for Refugee Integration," Home Office, London, 2005.

- Long-term support which ensures implementation of established policies and procedures
- Get a full picture of the organisation in order to build trust relationships
- Good casework and record-keeping is vital so that trust relationships are backed up by efficient, effective systems

#### Language and Culture of RCOs and Development Work

- Two-sided relationship: both development workers and RCOs must show commitment
- Development worker can often function as a translator: importance of using good, clear English which gets rid of jargon-heavy information such as government legislation
- Think outside the box in conveying information: may have problems with literacy, so it is important to present information in a variety of formats which promote accessibility
- Face-to-face advice and support are critical in understanding and meeting needs of RCOs
- Development workers must see beyond the language used in assessing the content of ideas presented
- Use of colour-coding and other non-verbal ways of expression in training and development materials (e.g. LVSC's 'Ready Steady Start')
- Need to emphasise practical approach, not merely theoretical training
- Referring RCOs to language services may be useful, but may need help in filling out applications to access courses, and course times and locations should suit attendees
- Identify person within organisation who has language skills and work with this person in helping to develop the organisation
- Clear communication enables access to information through appropriate channels to reach relevant individuals and groups

#### Funding

- Bring RCOs together in collaborative, partnership work
- Encourage organisations to search for right funding for them instead of tailoring organisations' operations to funding, since this approach does not work
- Encourage funders to simplify application forms

#### Size

- There are benefits of having small organisations, e.g. office space requirements and accessing specialist grants
- Build confidence of organisation in encouraging growth
- Signpost or refer organisations to training which fits their needs
- RCOs can also be seen as big or ambitious organisations, given their service to a variety of community needs
- Consult users, beneficiaries or clients in order to help focus an organisation
- Development workers should be aware and truthful about capacity of an RCO for growth and development, and how this would serve needs
- Ensure that activities match-up with the vision and aims of the organisation

#### **Question Wall:**

One of the highlights of the day was tackling the questions posted on the question wall. These questions were organised into four categories, namely Ethics, Collaboration, Funding, and Infrastructure Organisations.

Four subgroups tackled a separate category of questions. Highlights from the discussions in tackling some of the questions are outlined below. A selection of questions from the question wall has also been posted to the Basis Project Blog for discussion, which can be found here:

[http://refugeecouncil.typepad.com/basis\\_project\\_blog/](http://refugeecouncil.typepad.com/basis_project_blog/).

### Ethics

- How ethical is it to fundraise for a group if you're not sure how sustainable they will be?
  - What is the risk?: Development workers should establish necessary criteria for RCOs to access certain types of assistance
  - Beyond fundraising: RCOs need support for more generalist development work as well
  - Giving references to funding bodies can present ethical issues
  - Development worker needs to communicate clearly early on. If unsure about certain issues, the development worker should be honest and obtain a second opinion
  - Issues may vary according to groups and individuals as different people have varied experiences and knowledge/skills
- Highlight or ignore bad practice or not-so-legal activity?
  - Development workers' responsibility to do the right thing as the organisation could be breaking the law without realising
  - Highlight where practices are blatant but explain implications if accidental
  - Individual stories may be more complex than they may appear on the surface
- How can development workers help RCOs to develop a vision for their organisations without taking over?
  - Need to have trust between development worker and organisation
  - Ask neutral questions taking care of possible outcomes
  - Talk about tools to get there rather than telling how to get there
  - Have a balanced approach
  - Be aware of needs – help organisation find out what its needs are without instructing
- How can I confront practices that I do not agree with (e.g. male-only management committee)?
  - Need to draw line of professionalism even if it interferes with personal outlook
  - May be beyond the reach of individual development worker to tackle what may be larger regional or cultural issues
  - The development worker should step outside issues or conflicts between stakeholders and act as a neutral mediator

- How much should we help RCOs 'work the system' rather than focussing so much on good practice?
- How do I know when to let go? And when to say no? And how to do it?
- Should I fill in a funding bid for an organisation whose first language isn't English?
- How best can you deal with person-identifiable complaints that have been brought to you in confidence?

### Collaboration

- Would it be worth thinking more creatively? Linking with organisations out of sector for advice/ideas/etc... Collaboration on community projects?
  - Ground rules must be set out from initial stages of collaboration
  - Transparency and communication are vital in order for collaborative efforts to be successful
  - Collaboration can only be effective if organisations involved are ready, in terms of having explicit goals and necessary values
  - Since different organisations may have different values, being clear about expectations early on is very important
  - Partnerships may exist at an informal level, and thus may not be explicitly acknowledged while still being effective
  - Development workers need to understand the organisations they work with in order to promote collaboration among RCOs and between RCOs and other organisations outside the sector
  - Development workers must be sensitive to how fragmentation of groups in the UK may be a reflection of fragmentation occurring in home countries
  - Building trust between development workers and RCOs and among RCOs is important step in collaborative efforts
- How can we encourage groups to network or collaborate?
- Why do 2<sup>nd</sup>-tier organisations work in isolation instead of collaborating efforts?

### Funding

- Should 2<sup>nd</sup> tier organisations provide a fundraising service or a pool of professional fundraisers?
  - Important to build project management into fundraising efforts so that good governance and project development and management are seen as integral to fundraising and organisational development generally
  - Helping directly with fundraising and other development work with RCOs may be useful, but development workers must be careful not to take-over and must build themselves out of the situation
  - RCOs and development workers should be clear in the early stages about expectations in the relationship

- Is it possible for grants administration organisation to get funding for RCOs only?
- In 10 years time what will be the future of RCOs in terms of funding as everything is moving towards commissioning level service agreements?

### Infrastructure Organisations

- How can infrastructure organisations meet the full needs of RCOs?
  - Infrastructure organisations need to understand needs of RCOs in order to meet them
  - The formal culture of infrastructure organisations in comparison to the often informal work of RCOs may get in the way of the important trust relationship
  - Funding and resource availability also shape the work of infrastructure organisations
  - Infrastructure organisations need to be flexible, while knowing limitations
  - Work to create cultural understanding between RCOs and development workers
- Refugee community – organisations or refugee – community organisations? One implies size to the generic CVS.
- What sets RCOs apart from other organisations?

### **Going Forward – What happens next?**

#### *Achievements at the Event:*

Attendees identified the following as successes achieved at and because of the 'Working with RCOs' event:

- Building networks
- Reflecting on models of good practice and bad practice
- Support for thinking outside the box
- Gaining input on previous problems with collaborations, and how to improve future efforts

#### *Next Steps:*

Possible follow-up work to the 'Working with RCOs' event include:

- Having RCOs in the room to promote inclusivity and understanding (Future partnership between LVSC, RC and EOU to organise follow-up event bringing RCOs and second-tier workers together already in planning stages)
- Blogging responses to questions posted on the board
- Sending list of questions from question wall to RCOs, possibly via RC's RCO News

- Need to examine and build knowledge around why previous attempts at collaboration in forming Refugee Forums in specific boroughs or areas have floundered
- Helping development workers to change organisational culture
- Create mapping of organisations in boroughs in terms of culture, expectations and type
- Create networks and events with other organisations, RCOs and development workers
- Establish a quarterly meeting between RCOs and development workers to discuss ongoing concerns and emerging issues

**Resources:**

Amas, N. and Price, J. "Strengthening the Voice of Refugee Community Organisations within London's Second-tier Voluntary Sector: Barriers and Opportunities," London Refugee Voice, London, 2009.

[http://www.lrv.org.uk/downloads/Strengthening\\_the\\_Voice\\_report.pdf](http://www.lrv.org.uk/downloads/Strengthening_the_Voice_report.pdf).

Refugee Council and Refugee Action, "Refugee Community Organisations in England – Realising Potential," London, 2007.

[http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk/Resources/The%20Basis%20Project/Documents/PDF/BASIS\\_Report\\_RCOs\\_in\\_England\\_Realising\\_Potential.pdf](http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk/Resources/The%20Basis%20Project/Documents/PDF/BASIS_Report_RCOs_in_England_Realising_Potential.pdf).

UK Border Agency, "Integration Matters: a National Strategy for Refugee Integration," Home Office, London, 2005.

[http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind/en/home/laws\\_policy/refugee\\_integration0/a\\_national\\_strategy.html](http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind/en/home/laws_policy/refugee_integration0/a_national_strategy.html).

Valentine, R. "Refugee and Migrant Community Organisations in 2009: the first in an annual series of reflections on the state of the sector," Evelyn Oldfield Unit, London, 2009.

<http://www.evelynoldfield.co.uk/downloads/RMCOs%202009.pdf>.

Resource materials, news and information on RCOs, development work and for direct support at [www.thebasisproject.org.uk](http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk)