

“Building New Lives”

*North West Refugee Development
Conference*

September 11th 2004



Contents

Introduction	3
Project Aims	4
The conference in brief	5
Presentations	6
Workshop reports	7
Evaluation	8
Accounts	9
Recommendations and comments	10
About Refugee Action	12

Introduction

There have been refugee communities in the North West of England for hundreds of years. They have made an immense contribution to the region, both culturally and financially. The last 20 years have seen the growth of a number of vibrant communities. Dispersal, under the authority of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act and beginning in the year 2000, marked a significant change. Asylum seekers were dispersed around the country by the National Asylum Support Service. Since then tens of thousands of asylum seekers from nearly 100 countries have arrived and have been spread around over 20 local authority areas in the North West.

The scale of dispersal has not been matched by support arrangements, and the system itself has often struggled to cope. New refugee communities arrived in communities which may have had little previous experience refugee communities. Statutory and voluntary organisations struggled with the parallel service that is NASS. Vulnerable people were left adrift in systems and neighbourhoods they did not understand. Media hostility compounded the problem. Many organisations responded, sometimes heroically, to support these people. Perhaps the greatest response, and one that has often been overlooked, has come from refugee communities themselves.

Refugee led groups are many and various. Some date from prior to dispersal. Others have formed since. Many have been formed out of the selfless and unpaid work of 1 or 2 individuals with good English and a working knowledge of 'the system'. There is no record of the number of hours of unpaid work that refugees have put in to support vulnerable people in their communities and beyond. It must run into many tens of thousands. They have provided advice and signposting, interpretation and translation, social support, cultural activities and much more. Many mainstream services would have failed to function were it not for the 'happy coincidence' that clients who spoke little English often arrived with a fluent speaker in tow. Often there has been little recognition of the organisation and effort that brought about this coincidence.

A sector of refugee led groups is emerging. They are formalising, fundraising and professionalising. They are becoming a significant part of the voluntary sector. In some areas they have had significant help from voluntary sector infrastructure development organisations, and developed partnerships with the wider voluntary sector. In other areas, especially 'new dispersal areas' there has been less support - often due to a lack of real contact.

This conference aimed to build relationships between refugee led groups and the wider voluntary sector, especially infrastructure agencies in order that the support that is provided to refugees and asylum seekers in the North West can be of the highest possible quality, and that the refugee led sector can develop a distinctive and influential voice within the voluntary sector.

Project aims

The conference was organised by Refugee Action and One North West and funded by Government Office North West under the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Development and Exemplar Projects Early Spend fund.

Aims

- Create important and enduring links between Voluntary and Community Sector agencies including refugee community organisations
- Prove the ability of the Voluntary and Community Sector to work with refugees and asylum-seekers
- Initiate a network that will lead to future events and ongoing information sharing.
- Improve the quality and effectiveness of development workers and the organisations they work with

Agreed outcomes

- Conference with skill development workshops and networking opportunities
- Conference report distributed to all participants
- Email practice sharing group developed
- Contact list created to keep key individuals up to date of developments in field

The Conference In Brief

Over 100 people attended the conference at Friends Meeting House in Manchester, with around 40 from refugee communities.

The opening session started with keynote speeches from Sylvia Sham, Director of Wai Yin Chinese Women's Centre and Zafir Belic, Development Specialist at Refugee Action opened proceedings. Before and after lunch a workshop programme ran offering a choice of 2 from 9 workshops. During lunch there was also an opportunity to meet with a number of funders operating in the region.

The final session included presentations from Immigration Minister Des Brown and from Sandy Buchan, Chief Executive of Refugee Action. It concluded with a question and answer session

Presentations

Sylvia Sham

Sylvia started by outlining the history of Wai Yin, from a small group of committee Chinese women volunteers in 1986 to a major service provider employing 17 full time staff .

She spoke about the additional challenges for a migrant community dealing with funding criteria and regimes: Why services were not provided for the Chinese community, difficulties about asking for help within the community, lack of knowledge of funding sources and problems with jargon.

She identified strengths such as the knowledge and passion of staff, a realisation of the importance of networking, having clear goals, a willingness to take opportunities and an understanding of the need to be able to find evidence to demonstrate the work that has been done.

She also identified a few weaknesses, including ongoing problems with jargon, with understanding criteria rules and regulations and with the lack of time in a week to get everything done!

Zafir Belic

Zafir began with a definition of Community Development:

“Community development is about the active involvement of people in the issues which affect their lives and focuses on the relation between individuals and groups and the institutions which shape their everyday experience. It is a developmental process, which is both a collective and individual experience. It is based on a commitment to equal partnership between all those involved to enable a sharing of skills, awareness, knowledge and experience in order to bring about change.

It takes place in both neighbourhoods & communities of interest, whenever people come together to identify what is relevant to them & act on issues of common concern”

He went on to break this down into 4 strands

- Developing services such as advice, interpretation or even catering
- Developing organisations - constitutions, planning etc.
- Developing ‘support structures’ such as RCO networks
- Raising Awareness by campaigning, lobbying or ‘story telling’

Zafir concluded with a brief analysis of the development of a refugee community organisation ‘sector’ in London, picking up on key trends and looking at the lessons that can be learned from this.

Workshops

Participants attended 2 of the following workshops

Bosnia and Herzegovina Community Association in Hertfordshire:
A community development case study
Zafir Belic

Participative Research and Refugee Development
Zeinab Mohamed and Dr Hermione Lovel

Integration by Culture: a case study
Lee Omar and Amos Mukumbwa

Women Only Development Workshop
Maneer Afsar

Sport & Refugee Community Development
Tesfaye Yohannes & Tim Hilton

Development work with unaccompanied young refugees
Farah Kurji and Daniel Tekele

Developing a Refugee Led advice service
Fallah Kano

Community development work with emerging refugee community organisations
Phil Davis and Ali Mohamed

Youth Work and refugee community development
Julie Kashirohamwe and Nicolette Muzazi

Evaluation

Over 100 people attended the conference, nearly 40% of them from refugee communities

We got 68 evaluation forms back. We asked people to grade various aspects of the conference from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

Information before the conference	3.8	Venue	4.1
Organisation on the day	4.3	Catering	4.1
Overall quality of conference	4.2		

The 2 keynote presentations were also graded

Wai Yin	4.6	London perspective	4.2
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The workshops overall were graded at 4.2, & individually varied between 3.8 and 4.4. Interestingly every workshop was graded as 'excellent' by at least one person.

We asked people what were the most and least useful aspects of the conference. All comments made by more than 1 person are repeated here

Most useful		Least useful	
Networking	30	Workshop(s)	7
Workshops	21	Presentations	3
Information	8	Timetable	2
Presentation	5	Food	2

Project Accounts

Income	
Grant from Government Office North West	6000
Expenditure	
Speakers fees	416
Venue	664
Refreshments	729
Travel expenses	278
Publicity and mail outs	660
Equipment Hire	300
Stationary & Delegates pack	697
Administration of conference	700
Interpretation and Translation	
Total	4445

Recommendations and comments

'Building new lives' prioritised networking and services development and so did not directly generate recommendations. The following recommendations are derived both from conference feedback and from Refugee Action's day-to-day work.

The refugee sector, and especially refugee led organisations, may differ significantly from other organisations:

- They may be led by people whose written English is poor
- They may be very isolated
- They may have little or no understanding of the British voluntary sector
- Key individuals, usually volunteers, may well be under extraordinary pressure of time and emotional demands (such as the demand to find housing or food for a destitute compatriot)
- The services they deliver are often not 'additional' to their communities but may be the only means to mediate access to the most basic and vital services (such as helping a sick and illiterate asylum seeker register with a GP). Language skills and cultural awareness may make these the only organisations with the combination of expertise and to carry this out.
- They may spend much of their time dealing with organisations (such as NASS) which are a mystery to much of the rest of the voluntary sector
- They may relate to communities that straddle funding and administrative boundaries

This has a number of significant implications:

Organisational support

Central to these recommendations is a recognition of the need for 3 differing but complementary forms of support.

- **Generalist organisational support.** This comprises of 'packages' of support, for example fundraising training or a time limited set of consultancy sessions on developing a constitution. These are appropriate for all organisations including refugee led ones.
- **Specialist organisational support.** This is specialist training on subjects only of relevance to organisations doing significant work with refugees. It may require considerable knowledge of the issues and support mechanisms that impact on refugee communities. This may also include specialist input increasing the effectiveness of generalist infrastructure support organisations.
- **Community development.** Many refugee organisations do not access other forms of support because either they are not aware of it or they lack confidence to approach it for support. There is a vital need for community development work that builds long term relationships of trust with emerging refugee led groups. These can then refer to a range other support services.

Without this foundation other forms of support are unlikely to be effective, even if accessed.

Networking

- There is an urgent need to link refugee communities:
 - with each other for mutual learning and support
 - with infrastructure organisations
 - with key providers of services for refugees and asylum seekers

Information

- Refugee led organisations must be kept up to date with:
 - General voluntary sector information, such as funding updates
 - Specialist refugee sector information (policy and procedures change frequently and may have significant consequences for clients of refugee led services)

Funding

In many areas, small pots of start up funding are available. With community development support this can be accessed by refugee led groups with little more difficulty than any other groups. The nature of the work undertaken by many refugee led groups is that the need for it will not have disappeared by the time the start up funding has run out. This leaves a core need with no core funding to meet it. There is a need to identify those organisations that are meeting priority needs and to provide resources for them to operate with some degree of long term security and to support the development of the people running them.

About Refugee Action

Refugee Action is an independent, national charity working to enable refugees to build new lives in the UK. We provide practical emergency support for newly arrived asylum seekers and long-term commitment to their settlement, and received 36,000 visits from asylum seekers last year. As one of the country's leading agencies in the field, Refugee Action has 25 years' experience in pioneering innovative work in partnership with refugees.

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