

RCOs and the power of campaigning

What is power? That was the question that was posed to 18 campaigners drawn from eight diverse Refugee Community Organisations and Refugee Community Women's Organisations from three London boroughs. These 18 individuals were participating in the first ever Refugee Council Refugee Empowerment Project workshop, one of a programme of six that endeavoured to equip RCOs with the skills and 'know-how' to campaign on the issue of destitution of asylum seekers. By the end of the first workshop, the group agreed that power is the ability to take action, to do things, to make things happen. The Refugee Empowerment Project seeks to support RCOs to do just that.



participants at a Refugee Empowerment Project workshop

But why should RCOs campaign? Imagine after a long day at work you open your front door and water is pouring down on you from the ceiling. You rush to get a bucket to catch the water. It quickly fills up so you find a saucepan from the kitchen. That fills up too. You are so desperately looking for containers to collect the water so as not to ruin your lovely carpet that you do not have time to go upstairs and find out where the water is coming from. Perhaps it is simply that your son has left the bathroom tap on!

Unfortunately, changing government policy on asylum is not as easy as turning off a tap. Many RCOs deal with the consequences of UK government policy on refused asylum seekers as destitute people turn to them for support. And of course it is vitally important to meet their immediate needs. However, there is a danger of always addressing the symptoms rather than tackling the causes; looking for a bed for one person, rather than challenging a system that forces thousands to sleep rough.

Here at the Refugee Council we are very excited about the Refugee Empowerment Project, about the idea of campaigning with RCOs to address

the issue of destitution. Why? Because RCOs are working at a grassroots level and understand the issue. It is you and your organisations that deal with these issues everyday. That witness everyday how government policy is resulting in destitution of people seeking asylum. That means what you say carries weight.

The Refugee Empowerment Project represents a first step to campaigning with RCOs. Following a series of workshops the project's RCO partners are starting on, or continuing on, their paths as campaigners. They are now equipped with a better understanding of how to fight injustice and inequality, to build up pressure, and to get the

people who make the decisions to do the right thing. However, the workshops were only one element of the project. The Refugee Council will continue to work with these eight RCOs through one-to-one mentoring over the next six months, supporting them in their campaigning on the issue of destitution of asylum seekers in their communities. Watch this space for future updates on the RCO campaigners!

Campaigning, gathering popular support to persuade decision-makers to act, can and does lead to lasting change. No organisation is too small to make a difference. As Anita Roddick, Founder of The Body Shop, once said, "if you think you're too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito."

The Refugee Council's Refugee Empowerment Project is a one year pilot project funded by the City Parochial Foundation, working with RCOs based in Brent, Barnet and Camden. This is work that the Refugee Council plans to expand in the future. If you are interested in finding out more, or being involved at a later date, please contact Anna Musgrave:

anna.musgrave@refugeecouncil.org.uk

Policy and campaigns update

Campaigning in the North East

By Sam Dore, leader of the RRF* North East "let them work" campaign subgroup

I first heard about the launch of the national "let them work" campaign by the Refugee Council, STAR and TUC in April 2008, and knew I had to get involved. The Government's policy of not allowing asylum seekers to work did not make any economic sense, and was socially and morally wrong.

It has been proven, if people are allowed to work, it helps with cohesion and integration, which is good for everyone. It is in the UK's best interests because people will be able to contribute as tax payers rather than being forced to live on benefit handouts.

Being a member of the Regional Refugee Forum North East (RRFNE), I was able to contact other members, and many people felt the same as me and wanted to do something. Our campaign group was created in June 2008 and soon after the Northern TUC offered to join us as partners. They have continued to be our closest partners ever since. The Refugee Council campaigns staff also visited us to give us advice and update us on the national campaign progress.

When we started speaking at meetings, we quickly realised that many people did not know that this policy of not allowing asylum seekers to work existed. But when they heard our testimonies about its impact on individuals, their families, the local community and the local economy, they were shocked. From my experience over the past year, I truly believe that the British people do not support this policy once they become aware of it and its impact.

The greatest tool in campaigning is our voice – we have to let people know the truth of what is happening, from the grassroots every day level. We are lucky to have the RRFNE to help us activate and unify the local asylum seeker community. Most people do not know this policy exists, and may never have met an asylum seeker. But if they have the chance to hear us, and see us standing in front of them as people like them, when they hear our experience, they think it is wrong. So they can sign the pledge** and tell their MPs and councillors that they want the policy to be changed.

News

The environmental debate – do you want to get involved?

London Remade is a not-for-profit business specialising in recycling and waste management. "Waste is a universal product and a universal issue," explains London Remade's chief executive Danny Silverstone. "And, because of that, I believe that it can become a vehicle for cross-community action."

For example, refugees, Silverstone says, might have experiences of waste management and environmental issues in their home country that could help deliver solutions in the UK. If that expertise can be harnessed, "there's the possibility [for Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs)] of volunteering opportunities, business opportunities and community leadership."

Silverstone also believes that RCOs, and minority communities in general, have been left out of the environmental debate. "I've been working in sustainability for about five years," he says, "and I'm still shocked by the lack of diversity. At meetings and conferences you very rarely see a non-white face."

That's why as well as developing their own resource efficiency and sharing their experience, Silverstone hopes RCOs can help shape the whole debate about effective waste management.

To read the full article and post your comment, visit the Basis Project website:

http://refugeecouncil.typepad.com/basis_project_blog/2009/09/resource-efficiency-and-waste.html

* Regional Refugee Forum North East, see www.refugeevoices.org.uk/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1

** Sign the "Let them work" pledge at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/campaigning/letthemwork/

Sharing experience

The Kurdish Community Centre - North London

Mark Campbell, Campaigns Coordinator, and Alex Fitch, Coordinator, of the Kurdish Community Centre talk to RCO News about the support they provide to refugee communities, their fundraising success and campaigning work.

The Kurdish Community Centre started in 1995 as a self help organisation run by volunteer Kurdish refugees giving advice to new arrivals.



Mark Campbell and Alex Fitch of the Kurdish Community Centre

Since then it has expanded, still relying predominantly on volunteers, and running various projects. We are coming to the end of a successful finance project funded for three years by the London Development Agency. This project aims to professionalise the financial systems of five other Kurdish community organisations, by setting up a programme of volunteers interested in finance.

We receive some support from Haringey Council to deliver our advice service through their Supporting People Programme. We have also developed a relationship with DASH (Drug Advisory Service Haringey) and have received funding for a seven month 'healthy body, healthy mind' community café project. The café will be an approachable place for all members of the community to drop in and receive informal advice and training on issues such as sexual and mental health, healthy eating, and domestic violence.

The café project is part of our modernisation plan, to generate our own sustainable income, with the intention of establishing a social enterprise. We plan to install a training kitchen and are seeking partnership from a local college to provide cookery classes. This could lead to event catering, and eventually generate more income.

With the change in the voluntary sector from grants to commissioning, it is important that we collaborate more with other organisations, and professionalise our approach. Medium sized organisations in particular will be affected by this change, and will need support in adapting to the new system.

As well as moving towards a social enterprise structure, we want to focus more on campaigning. Kurdish people are the world's largest stateless group, and we support their struggle for freedom. They are also a criminalised group: perceived by the UK government as a terrorist threat. Through our involvement with the Campaign Against Criminalising Communities, Kurdish demonstrations, and a recent letter published in The Guardian, we campaign for justice of the Kurdish people.

To have a bigger impact, refugee community organisations need to collaborate and campaign together. But they also need support in order to build up their campaigning skills; this could be something as simple as how to contact your MP. We welcome the Refugee Council's pilot project, The Refugee Empowerment Project, which supports RCOs in campaigning.

Please email us on:

markkurdishcentre@gmail.com or visit our website www.kurdishcentre.org to find out more.

Funding news

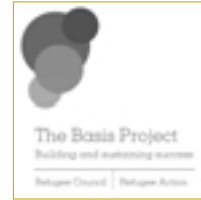
New DFID funding opportunity for small groups

The DFID Community Linking Programme (DCLP) is a new programme funded by the Department for International Development and managed by the British Council. It aims to increase awareness of global development issues through supporting community groups in the UK that are linked with community groups in developing countries.

DCLP is conducting a survey to find out how many community groups are already involved in Links, what activity they do in their Link, and what support they would most like in the future.

They are aware of the strong Links between some refugee community organisations and groups in countries of origin and are particularly keen to include these groups in the survey, to ensure that it reflects the range of community groups involved in Links. To tell your story and join their mailing list, visit www.dfid.gov.uk/dclp or phone **0161 957 7790** to find out more.

What's new on the Basis Project?



Training – London

On 25 September 2009, the Organisational Development Officers who work with London based RCOs delivered Business Planning training to those RCOs they are currently supporting. Shpetim Alimeta took the lead and Sharmarke Diriyee worked closely with him on this project. David Clark and Elaheh Rambarzini assisted with the facilitation of group workshops.

"This successfully piloted Business Planning training for RCOs was a culmination of hard work and intense preparation. It was the first time such a joint training had been put together by us so we were delighted that the training and feedback from the RCOs was very positive." Sharmarke said.

"In my experience it has been easier to engage RCOs' interest in Basis training sessions linked to fundraising, rather than good Business Planning, a crucial area of organisational development. RCOs requested more similar trainings in the future and they actively participated throughout the workshop, which reflects a good investment of our time." Shpetim added. To read the article in full and find out more about Business Planning go to: www.thebasisproject.org.uk (the Blog section).

Working together to support RCOs in London

The Evelyn Oldfield Unit's (EOU's) development team and the Refugee Council's Basis Project team in London have recently committed to working more closely together. Refugee Council's Basis Project (in partnership with Refugee Action) and the Evelyn Oldfield Unit's Community Impact Project are funded by the Big Lottery Fund's BASIS fund. The Basis Project's London Organisational Development Officers and EOU development team have agreed to collaborate on a number of key areas. We also hope to participate in each others' events and share resources more effectively.

The key idea behind this is to provide an increased level of support for refugee groups that will be more coherent, complementing both teams' strengths. Support will be more comprehensive and, as such, will meet refugee groups' needs more effectively.

Groups can expect to be cross-referred across teams and will be encouraged to access training and events of both the teams. Ultimately we hope to be able to be more effective and efficient in managing and sustaining refugee groups.

For further details on this new venture please contact, Sarah Menzies at the EOU sarah@evelynoldfield.co.uk or Elaheh Rambarzini at the Refugee Council elaheh.rambarzini@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

Financial Literacy Train the Trainer course

As part of its Financial Literacy Project, the Refugee Council is organising a Train the Trainer course for RCOs based in the West Midlands. The course aims to equip RCOs with the necessary skills to plan and deliver financial literacy training workshops for their service users, and consequently improve the level of financial literacy in their respective communities. The training course will take place in **Birmingham** on **30 November 2009** and in **Coventry** on **2 December 2009**. To book a place, please contact **Karla McLaren**, on **020 7346 1094** or **Ezechias Ngendahayo** on **020 7346 1163**.

Who's who at the Refugee Council?



Joe Levenson – Head of Communications

With a general election fast approaching, ensuring that Refugee Council works closely with RCOs and provides an influential and credible voice on refugee issues is more important than ever.

What the Refugee Council says, how we say it and who we say it to will all be key in my new role as Head of Communications. I will also be focusing on raising the public profile of the charity and on ensuring the voices of refugees are widely heard. Crucially, I really want to hear from RCOs about the issues you think the Refugee Council should be using the media to communicate on – so do feel free to contact me on **020 7346 6763** or by email joe.levenson@refugeecouncil.org.uk.