

## Refugees face to face with UK politicians

Roland Agbor came to the UK from Cameroon in 2004, where his life was under threat for his political activism. Since his arrival he has volunteered to help refugees and asylum seekers and now works for the Birmingham TUC Centre for the Unemployed, while studying an Open University course in politics, philosophy and economics.

"For me, attending the Labour party conference was my first time to see exactly how political issues are being dealt with in the UK, and find out how to put ideas forward to be debated and discussed. It is so important for refugees to be present in that type of environment so they too can be heard. It was a good idea for the Refugee Council to take us, and show they are standing up for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Also only by hearing what the parties have to say can you really decide which side you want to be on – Labour, Conservative, or Liberal Democrat? Then you can decide well and argue their case for them.

The party conference for Labour was very influenced by brother rivalry - they wanted one brother and got the other one! But I was so happy because Ed Miliband said he was from a refugee family. After his speech I went straight away and registered as a Labour member. As a refugee myself I was so happy somebody like that is leading a major political party, and if he and his family had come to the UK as a refugee today, he would also have looked to the Refugee Council for help. In opposition I hope they will remember immigration is for the good of the country.

It was great that we had the opportunity to meet the 'top guns' face to face, and tell them first hand about the experiences of refugees. The Refugee Council events were fantastic, especially when Roland Schilling from UNHCR spoke. The former immigration minister, Phil Woolas and Chukka Umunna MP were also there and had passionate words in the course of the discussion. Now they have heard from us on the issues facing refugees and asylum seekers, I hope they will now take this forward.

Every Thursday I do outreach work with refugees and asylum seekers in my community so I have

told them about my experiences at the conference. I now want to get more involved with politics, because we need more refugees and asylum seekers to do the talking for other people in this situation. Not many do, and the people who haven't been through the system don't really understand the issues.



Roland Agbor  
*"I now want to get more involved with politics"*

I want to become a politician - politics have been doing me in for a long time, so its time for me to do politics! I am studying an Open University course in politics, philosophy, and economics so that I can be confident in the facts I tell people and know the ideas behind them. I've always been interested to help people in my society in one way or the other, so doing this course will give me the tools to be able to advocate for people who can't do it for themselves.

In Cameroon I used to be an activist, and I was punished there. Now I know, I'm wiser now. I want to improve my knowledge so the better I will become the better I can campaign and lobby for the cause. I would go back to the party conferences to do this any time!

**Roland Agbor**

## Policy and campaigns update

### Cash support for refused asylum seekers

A new report, *Your inflexible friend: the cost of living without cash*, published by the Refugee Council, North of England Refugee Service, Scottish Refugee Council and Welsh Refugee Council, brings to light a multitude of problems caused by having to use the azure payment card.

It is unacceptable that asylum seekers are unable to buy the right kind of food, and that they have to face hostility in shops when they use these cards. The survival of vulnerable people, often with babies and young children, relies on a payment system that restricts where, when, and what they can shop for, and often does not work at all.

As the Government looks to improve the asylum process, the report strongly urges an immediate end to this inhumane system, and to replace this card with cash support for asylum seekers. You can download the report here [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/inflexiblefriend](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/inflexiblefriend)

### Tell your MP that asylum seekers must be allowed to work

MPs have signed a declaration calling on the Government to allow asylum seekers to work. But we need to get as many MPs as possible to sign the declaration, to encourage the Government to change the policy.

MPs are most likely to respond to people in their constituency who they represent in Parliament. Use the Refugee Council online action to tell your MP that asylum seekers must be allowed to work. It will only take two minutes of your time. Go to [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/work](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/work)

If you want to know if your MP has signed the declaration, contact us at [campaigns@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@refugeecouncil.org.uk).

### Join the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture in calling for action against changes in legal aid that threaten to hit the most vulnerable

Survivors of torture who have fled persecution to seek a safe haven in UK are among the most vulnerable and hardest hit by the Government's recent changes to legal aid. Cuts are taking place throughout the country as it responds to a difficult economic situation yet this must not be at the risk of the right to international protection.

A review of legal aid is expected to be launched soon. Call on your MP and the Minister Responsible for Legal Aid, to seek assurances that appropriate safeguards are developed as part of the review, so that torture survivors have access to specialist legal representation and do not face return to countries where they are at risk of persecution. You can find out more at [www.torturecare.org.uk/campaigns/3175](http://www.torturecare.org.uk/campaigns/3175)

## News

### The Basis Project National Commissioning Scheme

The Basis Project recently commissioned RCOs to do a number of pieces of work around the theme 'Sustainability and Survival'. We are very pleased to announce that a total of 13 Experience Papers and 6 Resource Papers have been written by RCOs.

The Resource Papers give an overview of resources available about themes such as social enterprise and partnership/collaborative working, to help other RCOs find their way through what can be an overwhelming range of resources. In the Experience Papers RCOs share a specific experience, and give tips to others about how they can learn from these experiences.

The resource papers and experience papers will be available at [www.thebasisproject.org.uk](http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk) from late November 2010. We hope you will find them useful, and would like to extend our warmest thanks to all the RCOs who participated in the scheme. In the current economic climate it is essential that RCOs exchange knowledge, experience and ideas to support each other, and we hope that these documents will help with this process.

## Sharing experience

### African Women's Empowerment Forum (AWEF)

*Tired of living in daily fear of deportation and being failed by various support agencies, a diverse group of destitute refused asylum seeking women living in Nottingham set up AWEF to help create a sense of security amongst themselves and to aid their integration into UK society. Faith Gakanje, National Founding Director of AWEF talks to RCO News about refugee women and the 'big society'.*

With three paid workers and seventeen active volunteers, we deliver a wide range of services to support refugee women, for example, women and social enterprise; sports training for staff and volunteers; and advice for refugee women on integration issues.

The Chinese proverb: 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime,' is how I view the 'big society'. However, my saying would be, 'when you train and educate a woman, you empower the whole nation.' We recently launched 'Pride venture enterprise (PVE), a sewing project which enables women to make clothes, sell them and put the profits back into the community. It is important for RCOs to engage in social enterprise as this will enable us to generate income to address and sustain the needs of our communities, without sole reliance on statutory funding.

If 'big society' is about empowering ordinary people then AWEF is part and parcel of the 'big society' as it encourages its members to volunteer and utilise the skills they have to become positive citizens in the UK. 'Big society' is about being able to be resourceful and as RCOs we are very used to being resourceful.

One such illustration is supporting destitute asylum seekers. Most refused asylum seekers will seek support from their fellow refugees including RCOs. These services which RCOs offer to support the disadvantaged within their communities are rarely officially recorded anywhere and yet take a lot of time and

resources to address. Such individuals may otherwise remain on the periphery of society.

Looking forward, we will continue to empower African women so that they can be assets to whichever community they are in. It is vital for RCOs to have a voice – by contributing to campaigns, discussions and policies that impact on their lives. As part of the Cities Of Sanctuary (COS)<sup>1</sup> movement – I use my own experience to raise awareness of the plight of refugees to the host community.



Faith Gakanje – Director of AWEF

For more information visit [www.awef.org.uk/cms](http://www.awef.org.uk/cms) or email [kudzaitatenda@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:kudzaitatenda@yahoo.co.uk) or call **07769 809 129**



### Funding news

#### Refugee Council research highlights the impact of the spending cuts on RCOs

In September 2010, we conducted research across England to assess the impact of the spending cuts on refugee community organisations (RCOs). The research looks at the uniqueness of RCOs; the work they do which is fundamental to the refugee integration process; the challenges they face and recommendations which can lead to collaborative work to sustain RCOs' much needed services.

The Refugee Council is concerned that the spending cuts may decimate the very sector that David Cameron aspired to support through championing the 'Big Society'. To download the report visit [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy/briefings/2010/impactofspendingcutsonrcos](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy/briefings/2010/impactofspendingcutsonrcos)

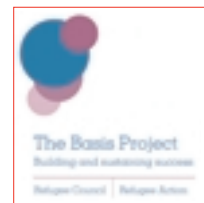
<sup>1</sup> Cities Of Sanctuary is a movement which aims to build a shared commitment among the local community to welcome refugees positively into UK cities. See: [www.cityofsanctuary.org/](http://www.cityofsanctuary.org/)

## What's new at the Basis Project?

### The Basis Project regional events

Over the last few months, the Basis Project has been busy hosting a series of regional events across England, focussing on a diverse range of issues pertinent to refugee community organisations (RCOs). These have included refugee integration, RCO representation, social enterprise and sustainability, and the power of networking. You can view the videos and transcripts from many of these events with more to follow in the coming weeks. Also check for any upcoming events at this link

[www.thebasisproject.org.uk/events](http://www.thebasisproject.org.uk/events)



## Events

### SCORES Project London Conference

**25 November 2010**, 10am-4.30pm, The Resource Centre, London

The Refugee Council's Development Team is hosting the SCORES Project London Conference on the role of sport and physical activity and how sport can be used as a framework for social change. A series of panels and participatory workshops will cover a broad range of topics, including

- the role of sport and physical activity
- developing sports projects and
- developing 2010 Games related volunteering opportunities

Participants will have the opportunity to network with colleagues and share experience, talk to funders face to face, and increase their knowledge of how to develop sports projects. We would also like to see more women RCOs developing sports projects, so come along and see what is possible!

Funded by the Football Foundation, the Supporting Community Organisations Refugees Engage in Sports (SCORES) is a new project which aims to increase refugee participation in sport by supporting RCOs and enabling them to develop sports projects which address development issues facing refugee communities and facilitate their integration.

To reserve your place, contact **Ezechias Ngendahayo** on **020 7346 1163** or email [Ezechias.ngendahayo@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:Ezechias.ngendahayo@refugeecouncil.org.uk)

## Training

### Refugee Council Social Enterprise training - Birmingham

**26 November 2010**

FREE (travel expenses and child care costs reimbursed and lunch provided)

This Financial Literacy Project training will provide practical information for individuals and refugee community organisations interested in setting up a social enterprise, in particular: organisational models; sources of revenue; planning and setting up a social enterprise. This training will be delivered by Social Enterprise London. For more information or to book a place email [karla.mclaren@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:karla.mclaren@refugeecouncil.org.uk)

## Who's who at the Refugee Council?



### Philippa McIntyre – Media Officer, Communications Team

My role is to speak to the press about issues facing asylum seekers and refugees, and promote the work we do to support them. I especially enjoy working with journalists

interested in speaking to our clients to highlight the difficulties they face, and success stories of those settled in the UK, since giving refugees a voice in the media helps to challenge stereotypes and gives a human face to asylum policy. I also update our Poliblog, Facebook and Twitter accounts, so our online fans know what we're up to!

I trained as a journalist and previously worked in another charity press office. I wanted to work for the Refugee Council, so I could have the chance to challenge the many misconceptions about refugees and asylum seekers in the media!

You can contact me at [media@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:media@refugeecouncil.org.uk) or on **020 7346 1214**. You can also follow Refugee Council on Facebook and Twitter at [www.facebook.com/refugeecouncil](http://www.facebook.com/refugeecouncil) [www.twitter.com/refugeecouncil](http://www.twitter.com/refugeecouncil)