

Lessons in Survival: how Brent Refugee Forum lived to celebrate its 10th birthday

In the late 1990s, as Iraqi, Somali, Afghan and Sri Lankan refugees poured into the London boroughs of Brent and Harrow, they began meeting informally to learn how to survive in their new home. Half a world away, Falastin Yassin, who had fled her native Somalia, was busy building a new life in a small Canadian town. "I graduated in law in Mogadishu," said Yassin, "but I went to Canada without knowing the language, with two children. I needed government support, but the locals saw it as taking something for free."

Today, Yassin is Coordinator for the Brent Refugee Forum, one of the few bodies providing training and fundraising support for refugee community organisations in London. The Forum has suffered its own growing pains since it began in 1998. But like Yassin, it has managed to thrive and recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. "Before the Forum began, these little refugee groups would form and quickly disappear," said Yassin. "They needed an organisation that could focus on funding and policy, while they focused on delivery."

Refugee groups in Brent and six other west London boroughs received their first financial lifeline in 2000 with a seven-year grant. The money allowed the Forum to hire a coordinator and help more than 30 local RCOs. It also found funds to open a Resource Centre providing a conference room, internet-ready computer work stations and printers for its members.

But when the money ran out last year, many Forums either shut down or were forced to reduce services. "We survived because we cut our information officer and took our administrator down to part-time," said Yassin. "Plus, local authorities have realised they need someone to connect them to hard-to-reach refugee communities."

Brent council now partly funds the Coordinator's post. But Yassin says she still spends nearly half her time searching for money, leaving her less time to research policy or shape it. Her advice is to use networking to fill that gap. "In order to survive in this financial climate, you must collaborate," she said. Brent Refugee Forum holds four open networking meetings

each year where Yassin invites speakers to share information on fundraising, as well as the main issues that affect her members: housing, education, employment and health. "The information is free and with it, you can overcome many challenges," she said.

Through the Refugee Council's Development Team, the Forum holds monthly fundraising surgeries for its members. And Yassin relies heavily on the Refugee Council to keep her informed of Home Office policy. But Yassin admits she has a 'love-hate' relationship with large organisations like the Refugee Council. She explains that she needs their help, but also wants to be empowered to do things independently.



Falastin Yassin - Coordinator of Brent Refugee Forum

Yassin approaches her work with a pro-active, 'can-do' attitude. Her enthusiasm and belief is vital in winning over funders and local authorities. "There is far more support available for refugees in Britain, even if they face more bureaucratic hurdles than they would in Canada," she said. "To me, sharing is the key. The Forum has faced many obstacles in its ten years, but we've also seen our profile rising higher and higher."

Brent Refugee Forum can be contacted by phone on **020 8459 9093** or by email on info@brentrefugeeforum.org.uk or brentrefugeeforum@yahoo.co.uk

Refugee Council Financial Literacy Project

Following the success of the pilot Financial Literacy Project in London, the Refugee Council has secured funding from the HBOS foundation to run a three year Financial Literacy programme which aims to improve the financial literacy skills of individual refugees, refugee communities and organisations working with refugees. Successful workshops have taken place in Birmingham and are due to continue in Coventry, Newcastle and Middlesbrough.

The project provides training, information and support from a range of experts and mainstream organisations. The training focuses on a range of financial literacy and related topics, including: tax, National Insurance (NI), starting a business,

personal and organisational budgeting, borrowing, credit and saving, cash flow forecast analysis, consumer rights and basic information on UK banking services.

Participants gain the opportunity to network, share experiences and take the Train the Trainers course. A Financial Literacy task group has also been set up, to provide support, development and to strengthen partnership working.

For further information please contact **Girma Afley** – FL Project Coordinator on **020 7346 1161** or email girma.afley@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

New Refugee Council RCO fundraising e forum

Sign up now to this fundraising e forum where you can share your views and experiences with other refugee organisations about current fundraising issues. You will also receive regular information on new funding initiatives. To sign up, go to: <http://groups.google.com/group/rco-fundraising>.

Voice4Change England

Voice4Change England (V4CE) was established in 2006 and is a partnership of national and regional organisations that speaks for the interests of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Third Sector at local, regional, and national levels to all types of policy makers. It aims to provide a co-ordinated policy voice for BME groups and organisations and supports them to thrive.

Since its launch in 2007, V4CE has responded to numerous Government consultations and has taken a lead on lobbying against the CLG's draft Cohesion Guidance for Funders. In addition they have participated in many conferences and hosted four quarterly policy roadshows to engage

with regional audiences throughout England. The issues covered include: CLG Cohesion Guidance; the review of the BME Compact Code; Local Area Agreements, the Public Law Project, and the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Area Assessment consultation.

V4CE welcomes the support of individuals and organisations – including refugee community organisations – to strengthen V4CE's role as a policy advocate for the BME Third Sector. For more information on how your organisation can get involved, go to www.voice4change-england.co.uk or email info@voice4change-england.co.uk.

Court recognises deterioration of situation in Zimbabwe

RN (Returnees) Zimbabwe CG [2008] UKAIT 00083

On 19 November 2008, the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal published a decision on a significant country guidance case for Zimbabwe. The Refugee Council has produced a briefing which summarises the Court's findings. To download a copy see www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/Zimbabwe_Nov08.

The Tribunal found that anyone who is unable to demonstrate support for or loyalty to Zanu-PF or the regime is at risk if returned to Zimbabwe. However, this will be a matter of fact to be determined on a case by case basis.

If a failed asylum seeker can now establish that they will not be able to demonstrate loyalty to the regime, then that could be the basis of a fresh claim. A significant number of those who have been refused asylum should now benefit from this decision, particularly those that have been in the UK for some time.

If you think you may be affected, please seek legal advice.

Sharing experience

Manchester Refugee Support Network (MRSN)

Sophie King, Forum Development Worker at MRSN talks to RCO News about their services.

MRSN began as an informal network of refugee communities in the early 1990s with the aim of establishing strong organisations and giving refugees and asylum seekers the opportunity to express the needs and aspirations of their own communities.

We registered as a Charity in 2005 and are now an established refugee-led grassroots organisation with six paid full time and two part time staff. But like many refugee community organisations (RCOs), we struggle to secure sustained funding to provide much needed specialist support to refugees and asylum seekers in Greater Manchester, including:

- community development – organisational development, funding and other capacity building support and training for RCOs
- an advice service – for refugees and asylum seekers on issues including, benefits, housing, debt and NASS payments;
- two volunteer advocacy projects - one supporting people to access health and social care services, and one providing general support to newly granted refugees through the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES)
- development and coordination support for the Refugee and Migrant Forum Manchester who campaign and lobby on issues affecting refugees and asylum seekers in Greater Manchester and across the UK

My role is to provide support to the Forum which has thirty members and over 250 supporters with a committed Steering Group of RCO representatives and community members who work hard to make refugees' voices heard.

The Forum provides: community leadership training - equipping asylum seekers and refugees

with the skills and knowledge they need to represent their communities; creates channels of participation for refugees and asylum seekers to access decision makers and service providers; and organises events to raise awareness among refugees and asylum seekers about their rights and to give them an opportunity to raise concerns and discuss solutions with service providers.

The Forum has achieved great success during its brief existence. Forum members have been meeting with the UK Border Agency (UKBA) since February 2007 to lobby for changes to the reporting and detention process in Greater Manchester. Outcomes have included: much shorter waiting times; more information provision - including leaflets on how the local reporting centre works and making complaints; training for UKBA staff to improve their understanding of being an asylum seeker in the UK; and an annual event for asylum seekers and supporters to raise concerns about the UK asylum process with the UKBA Regional Director, senior managers and policy makers.

The Forum is also currently working closely with the Refugee Council and the Trade Union Congress to take forward their national campaign to win back entitlement to work for asylum seekers. Lack of capacity limits the extent to which Forum members can participate in the Local Strategic Partnership. This is a key area that RCOs should be supported to participate in, but effective empowerment can only take place if there is capacity and funding to support it.

To find out more about the Forum, contact **Sophie King** on **0161 232 7420** or email forum@mrsn.org.uk or visit www.mrsn.org.uk/forum.

Funding news

Need Money? Tips for successful fundraising applications

The Refugee Council recently held a 'Meet the Funders' event where the following funders shared information with RCOs on their funding priorities and tips for successful applications. The funders included: The City Bridge Trust www.citybridgetrust.org.uk; Grassroots Grants from the Capital Community Foundation www.capitalcf.org.uk; BBC Children in Need www.bbc.co.uk/pudsey; and Unltd www.unltd.org.uk/rise. For details of grants available and eligibility criteria, please visit each organisation's website. Here is a summary of top funding tips shared at the meeting:

- Read the criteria before you apply and do not worry about using fancy English, just provide clear and accurate information.
- Strengthen your application by showing evidence that people need your service with photos, personal testimonies, number of calls received, feedback forms, video of an event you held, and so on.
- For IT volunteers, try TimeBank www.timebank.org.uk or Volunteering England www.volunteering.org.uk.
- Call for advice before you apply. If you have been rejected, ask why to learn from mistakes.

Housing rights website launched for new migrants

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact) have launched the first housing rights website targeted at answering housing rights queries for new migrants.

The site provides advice and guidance to both frontline housing advisers and new arrivals about housing rights - including the law on eligibility for social housing and related welfare benefits. The site includes sections on the specific housing rights of new migrants who are:

- Refugees
- EEA workers and other EEA nationals and family members
- A8 nationals
- Bulgarians and Romanians
- work permit holders
- people fleeing domestic violence
- people with social care needs.

For more information, visit the website www.housing-rights.info

Room hire

The Refugee Council regularly runs training for its staff and volunteers across London, Birmingham, East of England and Yorkshire & Humberside. As we do not have suitable venues in all of these areas, we are looking for rooms to hire from other organisations.

The room needs to meet the following criteria:

- Easily fit 12 – 15 people
- Have movable chairs and table
- Be within easy access of a major railway station
- Have access to tea/coffee refreshments
- Be within easy reach of a sandwich shop/café
- Have a flipchart and Over Head Projector

If you have a room (s) that you hire out that meets these criteria please email liz.webster@refugeecouncil.org.uk with details of the room and the rates.

Upcoming asylum law courses

As the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) no longer provide free classroom based training for OISC registered advisers, there will be two Refugee Community Organisation (RCO) places available on each course the Refugee Council runs for their staff and volunteers. The places are free to RCO OISC registered advisers. The next course dates are below.

To book a place on one of the courses you must be an OISC registered adviser providing advice through an RCO. Places will be filled on a first come first served basis. Please email liz.webster@refugeecouncil.org.uk with your name, organisation and the date you wish to attend.

- London – 3 December 2008
- Leeds – 17 December 2008
- Birmingham – 14 January 2009
- London – 28 January 2009
- Wakefield – 4 March 2009

Who's who at the Refugee Council?



Arnaud Vervoitte – Project Manager for the SMILE project

I started working as the project manager for the SMILE project in October. SMILE (Supporting and Mentoring in Learning and Education) is an education

project supporting separated children and children in families in London, Yorkshire & Humberside and the West Midlands. It is part of the Refugee Council's Children's Section.

When fully operational, the project will offer mentoring and befriending. It will also run school talks in targeted schools in order to change attitudes and raise awareness around asylum and refugee issues. A substantial element of the project will be its research element, which will assess its impact and effectiveness. The project will also produce toolkits and a report aimed at helping education practitioners and influence policy makers.

I have been working in the refugee sector for over six years, firstly at the Refugee Arrivals Project in different capacities, and then as a commissioning and monitoring officer at the London Asylum Seekers Consortium. For more information, please contact me on **020 7346 1116** or at arnaud.vervoitte@refugeecouncil.org.uk.