

Refugee community organisations leading the way

On 8 March, the Refugee Council's Regional Development Team (RDT) held its annual national conference in York for refugee community organisations (RCOs). The theme of the conference was 'Leading the Way – Refugee Engagement with the Wider Community'. The day was very inspiring, and mostly led by RCOs who delivered a variety of engaging workshops and thought provoking speeches around issues of effective RCO engagement with the community.

The first speaker, Chantal Breka, an RCO leader and part of Teeside African Health Community enchanted everyone with her experiences as a former asylum seeker in Stockton on Tees and the challenges she faced when trying to engage with her local community. As the elected Teeside representative of the Black and Minority Ethnic network at the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), she recalled her experience of attending her first LSP meeting. She said, "It was scary, I just saw a sea of suits, suits everywhere, but then I got the confidence to ask my first question!" she continued, "...and as you can see, I'm wearing a suit today! Even if your English is bad, go ahead, try to be part of your community, have courage!"

The workshops focused on RCO engagement with: women within the community; statutory service providers; other voluntary and community groups, LSPs and with the general public. These workshops generated a lot of lively discussion and gave participants the chance to share experiences and ideas which they could take back and use in their own communities.

Five RCOs were also awarded certificates for their impressive contributions towards engagement of their communities within local structures, for example in LSPs. These RCOs were: the Peterborough African Community Association; Kurdish Community for Kurds in the North East; Migrants Asylum Seeker Refugees Community Organisation in South Yorkshire; Tees Valley African Womens Project; and the Peterborough African Refugees Community Association.¹

Feedback from the conference was very positive and participants expressed an interest in having

more events like this in the future. As mentioned at the conference, the RDT's funding has ended, however the Refugee Council is exploring ways in which it can continue to hold such valuable events and will keep you updated.

Funding applications are pending that would enable the RDT's current activities to be continued by the new national Development Team that will replace RDT and take the lead in maintaining a dialogue with RCOs. Based on the enthusiasm of this year's participants, future conferences like this would form a part of the Refugee Council's new approach to engaging with RCOs, which was introduced by Jonathan Ellis, Director of Policy and Development at the Refugee Council.



A lively debate at one of the conference workshops (see page 3)

Jonathan emphasised the Refugee Council's desire to redefine its connection with RCOs and make it more effective, involving them more actively in the Refugee Council's policy and campaigning work as well as supporting their own local advocacy activities. Participants also expressed an interest in redefining and improving this communication and connection between the Refugee Council and the refugee community.

If you have any questions about any issues raised in this article, please contact **Jonathan Ellis** at jonathan.ellis@refugeecouncil.org.uk or on **020 7346 1097**.

¹ See page 3 for an interview with Peterborough African Refugees Community Association.

'Working together' – event for London based RCOs

We would like to invite London based RCOs to a half day event at our Brixton office on **21 May** from 1pm - 4.30pm to hear about the influencing work we are doing around integration and improvement of the asylum system and to think about how we can continue this good work together, with you.

We want this to be a really useful and meaningful event for you. There will be an information 'market stall' area where you will be able to network with other RCOs; talk to Refugee Council staff to find out more about the different projects we are running and the fantastic work taking place across the voluntary sector.

There will also be a choice of interactive workshops around the themes of influencing government policy on integration and improving the asylum system. More details about the day, including who to contact to reserve a place, will be sent to you in the post at the end of April.

Gabrielle.fox@refugeecouncil.org.uk

Consultation on 'single group funding'

The Department for Communities and Local Government has launched a consultation: *Cohesion Guidance for Funders* which follows the publication of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion's June 2007 report: *Our Shared Future* in which recommendations were made that funders (in particular local authorities) should not automatically award grants to community groups on the basis of single identities. This was with a view to encouraging what it perceives as 'cohesion' between communities. The consultation period ends on **29 May 2008**.

The Refugee Council is currently working on a response to this consultation. If you would like more information, please contact

Jonathan Ellis at
jonathan.ellis@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

You can read the consultation at
www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/cohesionfundersconsultation.

Refugees into Teaching news

The Refugees into Teaching project launched its new website: www.refugeesintoteaching.org.uk in November 2007. This includes useful information and tools for refugee teachers and advisers such as an A-Z List of services for refugee teachers.

The Refugee Council as lead partner of Refugees into Teaching are pleased to announce that they have been subcontracted to manage the Refugee Teachers Network (RTN). The network will run until May 2009, and beyond this date subject to continued funding. The main aim of the RTN is to improve the services to refugee teachers by providing a forum for all providers of services to refugee teachers nationally, in particular those in the Yorkshire and Humberside and West Midlands regions. For more information please visit

www.refugeesintoteaching.org.uk or call
020 7346 1166

BIA's plans for unaccompanied children's services

On 31 January, the Border and Immigration Agency (BIA) published its plans for the reform of unaccompanied children's services in a paper entitled, *'Better Outcomes: The Way Forward, Improving the Care of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children'*. The paper outlines future plans under five key areas as well as providing a summary of responses submitted to the original consultation paper. The first area is: keeping children safe from harm, which includes a consultation on the Code of Practice for BIA staff (like a commitment to child protection).

You can find it here

www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/consultations/keepingchildrensafe/

The other four areas focus on: help for local authorities to identify and support children who have been trafficked; establishing specialist authorities to provide care for unaccompanied children; improving the process and practice on age assessment and ensuring that the care of these children follows the decisions made on their asylum claims. Much more detail is needed before Refugee Council can really comment on detailed plans but we will tell you more as we know it. Our immediate response is that the BIA still has a long way to go before we are convinced that these reforms really are best for children. Meanwhile, you can read the document here,

www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/consultations/closedconsultations/uasc/betteroutcomespdf



Sharing experience

Peterborough African Refugees Community Association

Mr Moez Nathu, voluntary coordinator of Peterborough African Refugees Community Association (PARCA) talks to RCO News about their services and the invaluable work of their volunteers.

Peterborough African Refugees Community Association (PARCA) was formed in 2002 with the main aim of helping to improve the lives of African refugees and asylum seekers in Peterborough and other parts of the UK where support is needed. We do however try to help members of all refugee groups not just the African community.

As with many RCOs, we have no paid staff but many hard working and committed volunteers who constantly strive to ensure that all of our members and clients receive high quality support that fulfils their needs. Our volunteers are the backbone of our organisation and the key to our success – as well as our funders of course! We started out with 60 members and today we have more than 600 – this is testament to the growing need for our services and support.

We currently provide advice, guidance and orientation to our members to help make their transition to life in England that little bit easier. For example, one of our current projects: Refugee Active Citizenship and Employment Skills offers training to refugees and asylum seekers in basic computing skills as well as CV writing and citizenship skills. The project is funded by

Neighbourhood Learning Deprived Communities and is going really well. We get many requests from our members to learn how to use email for many different reasons. Quite often our members want to know how to use email so that they can get in touch with their families back home to see how they are and in some cases to try and find evidence they need to submit to the Home office.

We face continual challenges in trying to improve our services for our members, for example, acquiring more funding, developing good networks with other agencies and working in partnership with other organisations to achieve this. However, we are very grateful to have received capacity building support from Peterborough Council for Voluntary Services since 2002 and will continue to improve on the great work we have been doing together.

All of our work takes place against the increasing hostility to asylum seekers in this country – but we strive to give our members a much needed voice.

For more information call us on **01733 10091** or email moez@poor-refugee.org or visit our website at www.poor-refugee.org.



Funding news

UnLtd Sport Relief Awards (UK)

Through UnLtd Sport Relief Awards, UnLtd, the charity which supports social entrepreneurs provides grants of between £250 and £5,000 to young people to bring community cohesion and understanding through sport and being active. The funding is available to 11-21 year olds, who are prepared to use their passion for sport to bring respect and understanding to their communities by setting up their own projects. Applications can be submitted at any time and you can apply as an individual or as part of a group. For more information about UnLtd Sport Relief Awards please call **0845 3670 770** or email sportreliefawards@unltd.org.uk.

Refugee Council subcontracts work to an RCO

The Refugee Council's Development team is running a project on the **Power of Older Refugees** in partnership with other refugee community organisations (RCOs) in the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, and Belgium. As part of our new way of running projects and in order to engage and work together more with RCOs, we are delighted to tell you that we have subcontracted part of the Power of Older Refugees project to the Ethiopian Community in Britain.

At the Refugee council, we are committed to engaging RCOs in our projects and want to increase our partnership work with RCOs – this at the core of our future work priorities.

For more information, contact **Ezechias Ngendahayo** on **020 7346 1163** or email Ezechias.ngendahayo@refugeecouncil.org.uk or contact **Mr Alemayehu Dessie** at the Ethiopian Community in Britain on **020 7794 4265** or email postmaster@ethiopiancommunity.co.uk.

Basis Project London launch

Refugee community organisations (RCOs) from around the country joined staff and a host of other guests to officially launch the Basis Project in central London on 17 March.

The Basis Project is a new, England-wide service giving one to one support to hundreds of refugee community organisations (RCOs) to help them manage, develop and sustain their work. A partnership project led by Refugee Council and Refugee Action, the Basis Project is funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The Project is also working closely with funders and other mainstream bodies to increase their understanding of RCOs.

Chaired by the Refugee Council's Chief Executive, Donna Covey, the event was a chance to present the work done so far and to invite discussion about how things should be taken forward. "We have developed the Basis Project with support from the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) because we are committed to improving the capacity of RCOs to deliver services to members of their communities," Donna Covey explained in the opening plenary session.

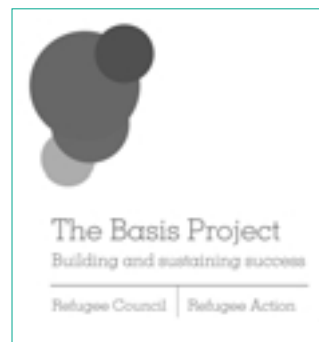
Sanjay Dighe, Chair of BIG, said the fact that the Basis Project had been selected for funding ahead of more than 1,000 other proposals showed the quality of the application. "It's incredibly important that we help RCOs develop

skills and capacity," he said, "and that we help refugees integrate into our society."

Sandy Buchan, Chief Executive of Refugee Action (the other partner in the Basis Project), spoke of his personal experience in seeing the vital role RCOs play in helping refugees and asylum seekers. While there were many difficulties regarding the current funding environment, he said, "The only place to start is with the grassroots and I hope the Basis Project will be able to do that."

Finally, the Basis Project project manager, Emily Kippax, outlined the work underway so far. Organisational Development Officers (ODOs) are now in post in every English region, she said.

After the speeches, participants then went on to a variety of workshops. RCOs interested in taking part in the Basis Project should make contact with their local ODO or via the Basis Project central team so that an eligibility assessment can be made. Regional Basis launches will also be taking place over the coming months. For more information call **020 7840 4486** or email basis@refugeecouncil.org.uk.



Who's who at the Refugee Council?

Shpetim Alimeta – Organisational Development Officer (Eastern region) - the Basis Project

I recently joined the exciting Basis Project team as an Organisational Development Officer. I work with Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) in the East of England, offering one to one consultancy style advice to support RCOs' development capacity and internal organisational infrastructure, this includes financial management, fundraising, governance and project development support. Every day in this new job, I rediscover the importance of RCOs' role in contributing to community integration within the host society.

I joined the Refugee Council in November 2000 and before my current role, I worked with the Refugee Council's Regional Development Team as a Regional Development Adviser where I really enjoyed working within a very dynamic environment.

In Albania, my home country, I worked as a coordinator and evaluator of different youth art

and cultural projects for the Youth Department at the Ministry of Culture and also in various roles within the voluntary sector.

Outside of work, I have organised a number of successful community events including Albanian and Balkan film festivals in London and Ipswich and I'm founder of the Balkan Cultural Centre in Ipswich.

Apart from my ever lasting interest in civil society and community development, I am passionate about cinema, poetry, culture studies, anthropology and most of all, Mediterranean cuisine. Please contact me on **01473 297 912** or email shpetim.alimeta@refugeecouncil.org.uk for further information.

