

## ECRE INTERVIEW

*with*

**AKOI BAZZIE - Resettled Refugee and Community Development Officer at  
the British Refugee Council**

*on*

### **The involvement of NGOs and refugees in resettlement**

*“I came to the UK after 12 years living in a refugee camp in Guinea. I am glad to be able now to help other refugees to rebuild their lives here.”*



Following the adoption of a Joint EU Resettlement Programme by the European Parliament last week, Akoi Bazzie talks about his experiences and the strength and importance of NGO advocacy and support for resettlement. Akoi Bazzie himself was resettled to the UK from a refugee camp in Guinea six years ago and works now as Community Development Worker for the British Refugee Council and is a Pastor in Sheffield (UK). He liaises between newly arrived refugees, local communities, local authorities and NGOs to promote integration as a shared responsibility. Akoi Bazzie shows how refugees positively contribute to society, in sharing his knowledge and helping other refugees to integrate.

### **Could you tell us about your experience in your home country Liberia, as a refugee in the Guinea refugee camp and your resettlement to the UK?**

I was only 14 when a civil war broke out in my home country Liberia, West Africa, in 1989. Rebels killed my father, who was a political activist and we had to escape. I managed to flee to the neighbouring state Guinea, although I was separated from my family. I haven't seen my relatives for 17 years now.

In the Kouankan refugee camp in Guinea I was registered as an unaccompanied child. I lived there for 12 years. One lasting memory from there is the fence, which was surrounding the camp. You could not move outside, because it was too insecure.

I was identified as being “at risk” in 2004. Thereafter I was resettled to the UK – to Sheffield – where the British Refugee Council supported me for 12 months. I gained volunteering experience and I also went to college to improve my English. Still today I live in Sheffield with my children and my wife and I am glad to be able to support resettled refugees to integrate and reach full independence in their new home as a Community Development Officer in the Refugee Council.

## **How did NGOs help you in your resettlement process to the UK?**

The main coordinator in the refugee camp was UNHCR. From 1998 on, I worked with them in the resettlement camp management team. Other organisations such as Red Cross and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as well as various NGOs were responsible for the practical inputs, including health, sanitation, housing or general distribution. The UNHCR together with the IRC organised an education system in the camp, which helped children to learn English for example. NGOs paid for the teachers.

In the UK my main supporter was the British Refugee Council. They agreed an integration plan with me to help me find out what I wanted to achieve, how I wanted to achieve it and what sort of support they could provide me with, in reaching my goals. Only in a year's time I was able to find employment with the Sheffield City Council. I am particularly proud of this, because for some refugees it took four or five years until they learned English or found a job. I could achieve this firstly because of my determination, but also thanks to the support of NGOs. The British Refugee Council linked me with other organisations as for example with Refugee Action and refugee community groups.

## **Where can NGOs add value in the area of reception and integration of refugees to the services provided by the State?**

I have been experiencing both types of aid for resettled refugees – state-provided and NGO assistance. The asset of NGOs is that they know more about the specific needs of refugees. NGOs are directly working with resettled refugees, so they can more effectively assess what people are struggling with and provide assistance tailored to their needs unlike the state which treats everybody uniformly. Don't get me wrong, this is also a good thing, but if people are having difficulties in finding their way through their integration and reception process, the state is not there to help them. The state likes to underline that refugees have a right to apply for their own house for example, but then they are not helping or explaining to refugees how to do that.

The NGO work is very, very important for me. As a member of the Refugee Council I aim to gradually integrate resettled refugees into the mainstream society. The experience of living in a new country is different for everybody and also usually difficult. NGOs help refugees understand the system before they get into the system. NGOs also have a wide network of contacts. They cannot provide all the services needed, but they link you to the appropriate people in charge. Even if you are not under direct support of an NGO anymore, you are still able to access services with confidence. They made you understand how to handle situations and procedures adequately.

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## **What is the role of refugee communities in resettlement and in the integration of newly arrived refugees?**

An important group in Sheffield is the Refugee Community Forum, which has a sub-group – the Resettlement Refugee Community Forum. One of the functions of the Forum is to help new arrived refugees to integrate. New arrivals are welcomed by the previous group of resettled refugees. This is very powerful, since these people have first-hand information on either resettlement or the procedures in their new home country.

As an NGO (the British Refugee Council) we encourage refugee community organisations to get involved to support their colleagues. The aim is that newly arrived refugees learn quickly from their colleagues, work together and find common answers to their problems.

**What are your expectations on the Joint EU Resettlement Programme? More generally, where do you see that European cooperation could enhance resettlement to Europe?**

We know that within the resettlement programme every country is trying to do its best. The way forward is to have a common resettlement system which builds on good practices, where all countries could plug in. We should use our common strength in making an effort to reduce the struggle of vulnerable people and refugees around the world, particularly in Europe. At the moment European countries are working individually. This needs to be changed. A common document which strengthens a common procedure is needed. Compared to America and Canada, where the support for resettled refugees is massive, we are just standing at the beginning and need to improve the system.