

The development needs of refugee communities in Leeds, Bradford & South Yorkshire

by

ARCHANA CHOKSI

with

MARZIEH BERENJIAN,
HLABERA CHIRWA
AND DORINE NAKUTI



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Introduction

Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) are organisations run by and for refugees. They are an essential agency for refugee integration, and act as a vital bridge between the refugee community and host society. They adopt a wide range of roles that include acting as intermediary, interpreter, educator, campaigner, negotiator, representative and advocate for refugee individuals or whole communities (Home Office 2005; Refugee Council and Refugee Action 2007).

In the Yorkshire and Humber region, (Y&H), very little information is available about how RCOs practically execute these roles, and the support they seek and need. It is crucial to address this gap, since this region receives the largest proportion of dispersed asylum seekers in the UK (21% of dispersed asylum seekers in 2007). In 2008, the Y&H Regional Migration Partnership found that 35,609 refugees and asylum seekers reside in the region, and there are an estimated 5,000 destitute asylum seekers.

The overall aims of the research were to:

- generate information about the current roles played by RCOs in the region
- understand their current capacity in relation to meeting the demands placed upon them
- investigate their understandings, expectations and roles as the sector becomes more professionalised in its approach to policy influencing

According to databases held by refugee agencies and refugee forums, there are 73 RCOs in Y&H: Leeds (29), Bradford (16) and South Yorkshire (28). The research sample consisted of 36 refugee community organisations: 11 in Leeds, 11 in Bradford and 14 in towns and cities across South Yorkshire. The research was carried out by field workers who are either refugees and/ or members of RCOs in the areas covered by the research, and / or known by those they interviewed. This enabled them to build trust where considerable research fatigue exists.

Key findings

Sampled RCOs offer a wide range of services to individuals, and take them through the process of asylum, offering services that include:

- Advice, information and guidance (95%)
- Signposting to immigration service (68%)
- Filling forms and writing letters (45%)
- Translation and interpretation (36% overall, but 100% in Leeds)
- Organising social and cultural events (50%)

A very small number of RCOs provide specific support / services to clients in areas that include education, health, employment, training and women's projects.

The research found that just 21 RCOs provide services to over 1000 clients each month. In the sample, just over 1 in 4 of those were refugees; the majority were asylum seekers at various stages in the process.

Four issues were found to be the most significant to refugee communities:

- 1. Destitution among refused asylum seekers.** RCOs are filling the void left by the withdrawal of state support for refused asylum seekers. RCOs state that supporting members of the community who are destitute is an extremely important responsibility, but also very taxing both emotionally and in terms of community resources.
- 2. Inadequate legal representation.** Since the reduction in legal aid, most lawyers have ceased to provide immigration and asylum services, which leaves many asylum seekers without legal representation.
- 3. Education for both children and adults.** Overcoming differences in language and understanding of how the UK education and employment systems work are critical to facilitating employment and social integration.
- 4. Addressing cultural differences between refugee and host communities, and among refugee communities themselves,** emerged as the fourth most pressing concern.

Despite the scope of their work, the research found that staffing and office facilities are generally very limited. The RCO sector is very heavily dependent on the work of volunteers. Three organisations in Sheffield were the only ones in the sample who had paid staff: there are no paid staff members of RCOs in Leeds and Bradford. Similarly, only a few well established organisations have premises from which to work. A high proportion of RCOs (76%) have no office space from which to deliver services or conduct meetings; 70% lacked any basic facilities such as computers, internet access and furniture. Most get by with virtually no facilities other than what they are able to provide themselves, using their own private telephones and homes.

All RCOs surveyed expressed a need for support with governance, policies and procedural development. Over the last 12 months, only 19% of RCO committee members had received training, and 90% of respondents felt they lacked the fundamental skills to make their organisation successful. Training needs were identified at personal and organisation levels. Most RCOs sought training in policy development, strategic planning, funding applications, developing a sustainable organisation, understanding governance, employment law, conflict resolution, managing finances and effective communication.

Almost 1 in 4 RCOs have no funding. Nearly half (46%) have an annual income of less than £5,000, while just over 1 in 10 has an income of over £10,000 a year. 39% of RCOs have no funding strategy, while over half lack experience and therefore confidence in applying for grants. At the same time, a substantial minority (14%) did not know what their community wants or what projects they might be able to apply for. Further barriers to funding include increasing competition for funds, language barriers, duplication of services, poor financial management, poor knowledge of funding available and no dedicated person(s) applying for grants. In addition, RCOs face competition for funding with the established refugee voluntary sector.

The emergence of Refugee Forums was overwhelmingly seen as important in various ways. Over 90% of RCOs feel that the role of the Refugee Forum is to create one voice and be a strategic body for refugees and asylum seekers. Over 80% of RCOs feel the Refugee Forum could help influence policy. All RCOs expressed the view that individually they do not have the capacity to challenge barriers to integration effectively, and to exercise their right to be recognised and actively participate as equal citizens. This can only be done through the collective voice of Refugee Forums.

Conclusion and ways forward

The RCO sector in Y&H can be characterised as consisting of a very small number of established RCOs surrounded by a periphery of volatile, semi-secure and insecure organisations, all of which find themselves in competition for shrinking financial support.

The research very clearly suggests that the focus of RCO work is targeted towards helping asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers who are destitute, while very few RCOs support their clients in areas such as employment, education, health, and benefits. This pattern reflects Zetter et al's (2007) finding that changes in policy and legislation concerning refugees and asylum seekers have resulted in RCOs shifting their focus towards the immediate needs of asylum seekers, rather than the longer term settlement challenges of refugees. They are now taking up more defensive roles of advocacy, protecting basic rights, and supporting asylum claims rather than proactively mediating for refugee integration as they had done in the past.

However, this research also suggests that RCOs lack sufficient awareness and expertise in relation to assessing needs and identifying funding opportunities. This emerges as a further reason for an overall lack of strategic thinking and action. RCOs themselves have identified their own needs for professional support and training in order to develop a more strategic stance.

Secondly, staffing and sustainability emerge as a fundamental issue. In relation to their multiple roles and responsibilities the infrastructural support for RCOs in the region is entirely inadequate. This impacts negatively in two key ways. Firstly, it inevitably affects the effectiveness of RCOs themselves. Secondly, it impacts negatively on the work carried out by other link agencies in relation to integration, employment, provision of social services, and so on.

A three-pronged strategy for consolidation and further support is indicated by the research.

1. Individuals require support to become more adept and professional in their roles as RCO members.
2. RCOs need organisational strengthening in order to meet community demands more effectively and to function more usefully as a bridge between their community and wider society.
3. Development of Refugee Forums is critical to developing the more effective voice in policy and advocacy that RCOs recognise is crucial. The forum provides the collective means for RCOs to meet shared needs, develop a strategic vision and increase access and influence over decision making processes at regional and national levels.

This report is produced by Jantela – an umbrella organisation providing infrastructure support for refugee agencies in Yorkshire and the Humber – in association with Leeds Asylum Seekers Support Network and the Northern Refugee Centre. Further copies can be obtained from LASSN: admin@lasn.org.uk or Northern Refugee Centre: admin@nrcentre.org.uk



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