

Integration and dispersal in the UK

by David Griffiths, Nando Sigona and Roger Zetter

It is often suggested that Refugee Community-based Organisations (RCOs) play a key role in assisting refugee adaptation and integration in the UK. But what happens when the reception policy for asylum seekers and refugees is fundamentally changed?

When asylum seekers and refugees were relatively few in number in the UK, RCOs were considered to be prime movers in facilitating their integration. 'Integration' is the process of 'getting used to' the new environment, of individual adaptation, but also implies a longer-term, two-way process between refugees and the receiving society. RCOs provided material assistance and facilitated access to the labour market and to the social support systems of the host country. To a greater or lesser degree they also provided political solidarity for their members in exile.

However, alongside the increase in the number of asylum seekers in the 1990s came the development of increasingly hostile policies of deterrence and restrictionism towards forced migrants. Part of this policy shift has involved fundamental changes to the process of providing welfare support and housing to asylum seekers whilst they are waiting for their applications to be decided.

Dispersal

The UK's Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 marked a radical shift in British asylum policy by introducing new procedures for the reception and accommodation of asylum seekers pending their claim for status determination in the UK. A previously decentralised system which allowed asylum seekers to live where they wanted to – typically, where they had access to social networks and communities – and to access the mainstream welfare benefits system was replaced by a centralised process.

A new agency, the National Asylum Support Agency (NASS), was established within the Immigration and

Nationality Department of the Home Office. The Act withdrew asylum seekers completely from all benefit entitlements and charged NASS with the mandatory dispersal of all asylum seekers, away from the pressurised housing areas of the south-east to areas of surplus in the older industrial cities in the Midlands, the north and Scotland. Accommodation is contracted mainly from private landlords and some local authorities in so-called 'cluster areas' where services are coordinated by Regional Consortia of local authorities, NGOs and accommodation contractors. Approximately 41,500 asylum seekers were dispersed in 2004.

This new regime has had many far-reaching impacts and has been subject to sustained criticism. This criticism stems partly from the fact that the messages coming from the UK Home Office are mixed. Alongside the tightening of asylum policies and the introduction of dispersal, the Home Office has introduced a refugee integration strategy (introduced initially in 2000 and elaborated further in 2004 and 2005). Refugee integration, like dispersal, is based upon the principle of developing regional refugee strategies coordinated by local authority consortia and involving RCOs as potential partners. However, recent research carried out in London and two dispersal regions (Birmingham in the West Midlands and Manchester in the Northwest)¹ suggests that dispersal has had a marked effect on the community-based organisations supporting refugees and asylum seekers, and that these effects are not always positive.

Integration or marginalisation?

The increase in the size and diversity of refugee communities and in the

number of RCOs, particularly in the dispersal regions, are among the most significant outcomes of dispersal. Dispersal has brought to the regions new ethnic/national groups – from francophone Africa, Kosovo and Bosnia, for example – as well as groups that were well established in London but had no foothold in the dispersal areas. In many cases, the growth in the number of RCOs has intensified networking between refugee organisations, local authorities and the main NGOs involved in dispersal. And there is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that RCOs make a vital contribution in meeting the welfare needs of their communities.

Our community is very isolated, very vulnerable and contains many people who speak little English and do not understand the British system. By running a drop-in fortnightly, it will enable us to provide advice, interpretation and sign-posting for asylum seekers. But also it will act as a social event for lonely and isolated Iranians.

(Iranian refugee)

The Iraqi society is a simple society... There are stronger family and neighbourhood ties and support. In the UK...[you] have to do everything by yourself. The only way to get support, if you don't know how the system works here, it's your community. If you have a proper community [organisation], with a small management, some paid workers able to translate and support you and a venue to gather together, life could be much easier.

(Iraqi Kurdish refugee)

The RCOs, in some cases, also provide training and routes into paid employment. Some Somali organisations have set up internet cafés, for example. By helping asylum seekers and refugees understand the welfare system, RCOs are assisting their integration into the structures of the receiving society.

However, some of the effects of dispersal policy have been paradoxical because RCOs operate within a set of external constraints. Thus the local authorities, NGOs and the main funding bodies in London and

new arrangements as representatives of their particular 'communities'. As a result it is very hard to access funding. This is a major impediment to developing structures and capacities to help their communities settle in and integrate.

Beyond meeting basic needs?

Despite the positive benefits associated with the development of RCOs in the dispersal regions, most RCOs at present simply do not have the resources which would enable them to contribute to the long-term integration of refugees. Their role has been and continues to be essentially 'defensive' – plugging the gap and meeting essential needs – rather than being actively engaged in the development of individual and community resources. In our study, only a very small minority of RCOs have the resources to run the education, training and employment programmes which would promote long-term integration into the labour market.

There are additional factors which also cast doubt on the role that RCOs are often assumed to play in assisting refugee adaptation and integration in the UK. One of these is the important distinction that emerges between formal and informal networking in refugee communities. There is, for example, a notable resistance on the part of specific refugee groups to formalising and institutionalising their networks. Not wishing to be part of formal channels or to participate in the competitive funding-driven

Support groups want to apply to all refugee organisations the same templates but they don't really know how to relate with the communities individually. They look at them as a whole but they never go to talk with them.

(Sierra Leone women's group)

model of the British voluntary sector are the primary reasons given. But in an environment which they rightly perceive to be increasingly hostile towards refugees and asylum seekers at both national and local levels, the wish to reduce 'visibility' and remain on the margins cannot be ignored.

In any case, formal organisations are only the visible part of a larger picture which includes a vast network of informal, transient, unnamed and unofficial forms of social organisation. The degree to which formally constituted RCOs are at the centre of official refugee networks, or peripheral to the main 'informal' sources of community activity, with respect to how integration takes place, is thus very uncertain. In the current context, it cannot be assumed that formally constituted RCOs are automatically the hub of community activity and the prime movers in fostering integration in community members.

If integration is judged in terms of a two-way process between refugees and the receiving society, then this

The city council decides this is how we are going to tackle the problem and we are forced to fit a square peg into the round hole.

(Somali RCO)

There is a huge problem of representativeness. Local authorities want to have one RCO speaking for [a] community and this often is not possible due to social, cultural and historical reasons.

(Refugee Action)

the regions still dominate how new RCOs get established and are 'legitimised' – or not, as the case may be. Institutionalised support can skew decision-making capacity and agenda setting in favour of the pre-existing major players involved in the dispersal process. It is perhaps less a partnership of old and new, than a patron-client relationship, or at least a matter of getting past existing gatekeepers.

The structure of the dispersal regime also inhibits RCOs' wider potential as agents of integration for those with Convention refugee status. Conceived within the broader rationale of deterrence and the control of welfare costs, dispersal is predicated upon an institutional model involving the Regional Consortia, NGOs and the private and voluntary sectors. RCOs have only a secondary role within these

Liberian family (part of UK resettlement programme for vulnerable refugees) at orientation meeting with Migrant Helpline aid worker, UK.



We have small funding for training and bits and bobs of things but we are struggling with funding. And one of the biggest drawbacks is the big funders tend to [say]: 'Oh, you don't have a track record.'... Filling in the forms because some of the questions are not straight-forward... We were struggling to understand what is the outcome, output, input, you see... Sometimes we don't know what they want.

(Sudanese RCO)

does not appear to be the agenda of the dominant regional agencies and institutions relating to RCOs. Their role in assisting refugee integration is given as a policy objective but, as the RCOs remain junior partners in the local consortia, they receive little substantive support. There is a wide gulf between policies which claim to

promote community representation, integration and equal opportunities and the actual outcomes for specific ethnic groups. What is happening to RCOs, particularly in relation to funding constraints and their relationship to mainstream agencies, is rooted in the broader structural inequalities which continue to hamper ethnic minorities in the UK.

Conclusion

This evidence suggests that far from being central to the integration of refugees in contemporary Britain, formally constituted RCOs may have been forced into a role which perpetuates their marginality as service providers on the edges of their communities. In such a situation, informal networks may be more important than formal organisations in the integration process. But we should not ignore the fact that this is often a strategy of last resort. Although newly developing organisations in the dispersal regions may choose to set up outside recognised channels, the possibilities for doing so are limited and heavily dependent on local resource availability.

Above all, the integrative potential of RCOs is severely limited by the emphasis on deterrence and control in asylum and immigration

policy. RCOs are players on a stage set designed by others. This raises important questions about how the limitations in the role assigned them can be overcome and about whether more transparent forms of partnership can flow from improved recognition of the skills and capacities they undoubtedly possess.

There is a seemingly intractable tension between participating and organising independently as refugee communities, on the one hand, and acceptance within official networks and social relations, on the other. In the past, the broader framework of migrant incorporation centred on multicultural race relations as a principal determinant of the ways in which refugees, as other migrants in earlier era, organised in Britain. As policy and practice harden, even the phrase 'refugee community organisation' risks becoming a pejorative term.

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1. Zetter, Griffiths and Sigona 'Refugee Community Based Organisations in the UK: A Social Capital Analysis', 2004. ESRC Research Grant R000239583. The research report is at www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/planning/dfm/rco.htm