

Kobciye: empowering Somali refugees in Nairobi

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Established by a resettled Somali refugee and now under the leadership of his children, Kobciye resource centre works to empower Somali refugees in Eastleigh, Nairobi.

In the early 1990s my father was one of millions of refugees fleeing the civil conflict engulfing Somalia. Relative to many others he was lucky – he was educated and able to secure scholarship opportunities in the United States, where he was resettled. From there he worked to bring over his still young family and to eventually settle in Toronto, Canada. Escaping a violent conflict and settling into a new community sparked my father's passion to help his native community. It began in 1993, when he helped the new wave of Somali refugees who were arriving in Toronto having escaped war, and it continues today with Kobciye, a community resource centre in the Eastleigh neighbourhood of Nairobi, Kenya, which he established. In the intervening years, and in spite of the challenges of keeping the organisation going, Kobciye has continued to grow. Its success is built on its

engagement with the community and ability to gain legitimacy and trust within Eastleigh.

Kobciye, which means 'empowerment' in Somali, is a resource centre that assists vulnerable individuals (including undocumented refugees) within the Eastleigh community, and provides skills trainings such as basic computer literacy, sewing and tailoring and other programmes. Kobciye aims to equip individuals with relevant skills that will build their capacities and lead to further opportunities. The organisation identifies the needs of the community through broad consultations with community stakeholders; this includes organising sustained engagement events and working with established community partners.

After my father's death in 2012, my sister and I returned to Nairobi to try to carry on his legacy. Having settled in Canada as

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refugees when very young, we had grown up in a completely different country, culture and community and we were initially taken aback by the sheer demand and impact that Kobciye was generating in Eastleigh. Although we were always aware of the challenges facing Somali refugees, particularly those in Kenya, truly understanding the circumstances of urban refugees was a profound learning process. Learning how to effectively create programming that accounts for and responds to the needs of the diverse local refugee population was a large part of this learning process. Eastleigh is a dynamic community of individuals of varying backgrounds, all tightly packed within a dense urban area. Adapting to the needs of the community and personally building trust and legitimacy while building on the legacy of our father was all part of learning on the job.

Integrating ourselves into the community and acquainting ourselves with the issues that individuals care about has helped Kobciye to continue to develop. Our own experiences as part of a family of first-generation immigrants gave us a unique insight into how we can cultivate new programming and community engagement. Some of the transitional challenges that refugees face in Canada are comparable to those faced by refugees in Eastleigh, whether that be accessing resources or navigating the legal frameworks that govern their existence. Drawing these parallels between our experiences and those of refugees in Eastleigh has helped us focus both our programmes and how we position ourselves within the overall community.

Appropriate programming

Alongside being a renowned regional business hub, Eastleigh is also the destination of thousands of refugees who are looking for a long-term home or to relocate to other (particularly Western) countries. Many individuals have set up

thriving businesses and integrated fairly well within the local community; others struggle, particularly outside the infrastructure of a formal refugee camp. Understanding these factors has helped us create a framework where we understand vulnerabilities and respond by targeting individuals who will benefit most from our programmes.

With formal education rates lower in Eastleigh than in neighbouring communities, we focus on equipping our members with tangible and applicable skills, including in computer literacy, sewing and tailoring and basic financial literacy. For example, our computer literacy programme aims to give students a basic knowledge of computer functions, on which they can build with further training. We also provide a sewing and tailoring programme that complements Eastleigh's thriving textiles business, and which can be a transition point for potential employment opportunities within the local community. Over the course of the last eight years of reliable and consistent programming, Kobciye has provided vocational skills training to hundreds of Somalis.

There has long been a negative perception of the Somali refugee population in Eastleigh,¹ and in 2014 tension peaked with the police crackdown known as Usalama Watch. This presented a significant challenge to our organisation. We responded by moving from empowerment and skills training to advocacy and awareness raising in order



Weekly seminar, run by Kobciye.

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to create a dialogue to combat some of the negative perceptions and stereotypes created by the police and security offensive. We held forums where discussions were held with local authorities and political offices, arranged rallies condemning police brutality and promoting cohesion, and organised cultural exhibitions that highlighted the contributions of each community within our immediate region. We also produced literature that aimed to counter some of the negative narratives that have surrounded the urban refugee population, particularly Somalis. Although today the tension has largely receded, there remains social stigma around the urban refugee population that

is still being contested and negotiated within the Eastleigh community.

Kobciye's impact in the community has continued to grow, with my father's vision serving as a roadmap for our progress and evolution. I am immensely proud and fortunate to be able to lead this organisation, helping the community from which I came and enjoying the continued support of the community which Kobciye serves.

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1. See Carrier N (2017) 'What Can We Learn From the "Little Mogadishu" Migrant Hub?' *Refugees Deeply* <http://bit.ly/Carrier-RefDeeply-Eastleigh>

