

REFUGEE AND MIGRANT COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS IN 2009

The first in an annual series of
reflections on the state of the sector

Ruth Valentine
for The Evelyn Oldfield Unit



CHAIR'S FOREWORD

There may never have been a time when life in the UK for refugees and migrants was simple and predictable. Exile itself, whether voluntary or forced, creates bewilderment; and, despite its vaunted reputation, the host society has never been unreservedly delighted at the arrival of strangers. Certainly in 2009 people arriving from the less rich countries of the world have much to concern them: public and media attitudes of increasing xenophobia; rising poverty, unemployment and homelessness; and for some, detention with little recourse to the law, and enforced destitution. This report lists starkly the pressures on migrants and refugees in London, and the consequent demands that they make of the community organisations set up to assist them.

For if exile has never been easy, by the same token the exiled have had to develop the energy and resourcefulness to survive and thrive, and to support others in doing the same. The 335 or more organisations supporting refugees and migrants in London stand as evidence of human compassion and resolve. Severely underfunded and heavily reliant on volunteers, refugee and migrant community organisations deliver a range of services, in community languages and in culturally acceptable ways, to those that the statutory services stigmatise as 'hard to reach.'

This report is the first of an annual series considering the current state of the refugee and migrant community sector in London. The Evelyn Oldfield Unit, itself established and led by refugees, uses its own limited resources to support refugee and migrant community organisations in their work, enabling them to build skills and confidence in their dealings with statutory authorities and funders, and promoting their unique insight and vision. This annual review will form the basis of the Unit's strategy and services. I have no doubt that year by year the challenges reported will evolve, but equally I am sure that community organisations will respond with passion and skill to whatever circumstances they and their users encounter.

Tahera Aanchawan
Chair

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report on the current state of the Refugee and Migrant Community Organisation (RMCO) sector was commissioned by the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and compiled by Ruth Valentine, a consultant specialising in the sector. It draws on a conference hosted by the Unit in March 2009, entitled *Beyond Survival: Responding to Recession*, as well as relevant strategy and consultation papers, and an on-line survey of RMCOs.

The Evelyn Oldfield Unit, established in 1994, provides support and guidance for RMCOs in London, encouraging them to develop their capacity to provide services to their communities and to make the voice of refugees and migrants heard in the wider society.

There is as yet little research on specifically migrant organisations, especially those serving new communities from the European accession countries. This report relies principally on information regarding refugee community organisations (RCOs) and those organisations that serve both groups.

1 The nature of RMCOs

RMCOs vary considerably: in the populations they serve, the demands those service users make, and the organisation's consequent ability to attract funding. What they generally share is a history – having been set up by the most highly educated and active members of the community – and a dual focus, on the community in the UK and the home country. High levels of commitment make RMCOs remarkably resilient, with a largely volunteer workforce providing a wide range of services that are culturally accessible. This reliance on volunteers however makes it hard for many RMCOs to meet the bureaucratic requirements of funders.

2 Surviving recession: funding

The recession has not brought a sudden funding crisis to a previously well-funded sector. 63% of RCOs surveyed in 2007 had an annual income of less than £50,000. RMCOs have always been under-funded compared to other providers of similar services. Those represented at the Unit's *Surviving Recession* conference were aware of the potential impact of recession but had not yet experienced it. Speakers however highlighted the potential for even greater financial pressure, with trusts having a diminishing asset base and the public sector less able to fund the third sector.

3 Surviving recession: demand for services

There are an estimated 900,000 migrants and refugees in London; and London is the most unequal region of the UK. Newly arrived migrants and refugees face problems of immigration, unemployment, housing, healthcare, education, community safety and immigration, all compounded for many by language difficulties. Inability to access ESOL classes is an ongoing frustration. All these issues bring people to RMCOs for advice, advocacy and interpreting services. The dispersal of asylum-seekers has not reduced the numbers of service users, since many people continue to need support after their asylum decision. The enforced destitution of unsuccessful asylum-seekers puts a particular burden on RMCOs. The impact of recession on the migrant workforce

and on government attitudes could result in further pressure.

4 Expectations

Recent government papers that refer to RMCOs have stressed their role in community cohesion and integration. These are ill-defined concepts, and the capacity of RMCOs to promote them is not always clear. Parallel pronouncements disparaging interpreting and translation services suggest that RMCOs' own view of their core task is not recognised. The Singh Commission on Integration and Cohesion proposes a move away from funding organisations that cater for a single ethnic, religious or cultural group. If this is adopted, many RMCOs will be affected. Nevertheless, some of the implications can usefully be considered. Do RMCOs encourage dependency or autonomy in their service users? Are RMCOs themselves sufficiently linked into mainstream culture?

The move towards commissioning rather than grant funding has potentially serious consequences for the entire voluntary and community sector, which traditionally meets needs not yet identified by statutory services. RMCOs will need to engage with commissioning authorities so that their up-to-date and in-depth knowledge of their community informs commissioning decisions.

5 Priorities for the Evelyn Oldfield Unit

The following are proposed as priority areas for the Unit's work in the coming year.

1 supporting good governance

All the social conditions described in this report place a requirement on the Trustees of RMCOs to govern their organisations with vision, awareness and diligence. Finding ways to engage them that are both effective and practicable is an ongoing challenge for the Unit.

2 supporting self-assessment

To survive in the current funding situation, RMCOs will need to demonstrate the impact they have on their communities. The Unit can helpfully work with RMCOs to develop evaluation tools that are both effective and manageable.

3 developing a voice

It is harder than ever for refugees and migrants to be heard. RMCOs will need to develop new ways of influencing public policy, and the Unit can help them to do this. The Unit itself will continue to advocate for the sector and to showcase its successes.

4 thinking creatively about cohesion and integration

The Unit can raise awareness of the nature of belonging and citizenship, and the possibilities of constructive engagement.

5 enabling research

The Unit can assist both RMCOs and statutory authorities by piloting innovative ways of researching the make-up, size and concerns of refugee and migrant communities.

6 making commissioning work

The Unit may want to offer workshops and/or surgeries for RCOs, and to find ways of disseminating best practice amongst commissioners.

7 facilitating partnership working

The Unit can facilitate suggest appropriate partner organisations, brief RMCOs on making partnerships work, and provide support if there are difficulties.

8 gathering information on migrant communities

If the Unit is to engage fully with migrant as well as refugee communities, it will need to highlight what research there is, or to sponsor research itself, and make use of it in its service planning.

Introduction

This report on the current state of the Refugee and Migrant Community Organisation (RMCO) sector was commissioned by the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and compiled by Ruth Valentine, a consultant specialising in the sector. It draws on a conference hosted by the Unit in March 2009, entitled *Beyond Survival: Responding to Recession*, and attended by 58 representatives of RMCOs and other agencies. The report draws together themes from relevant strategy and consultation papers, at local and national level, and places them alongside the experiences of RMCOs themselves and of the staff and management of the Unit.

The Evelyn Oldfield Unit, established in 1994, provides support and guidance for RMCOs in London, encouraging them to develop their capacity to provide services to their communities and to make the voice of refugees and migrants heard in the wider society.

Methodology

The report was compiled using the following resources:

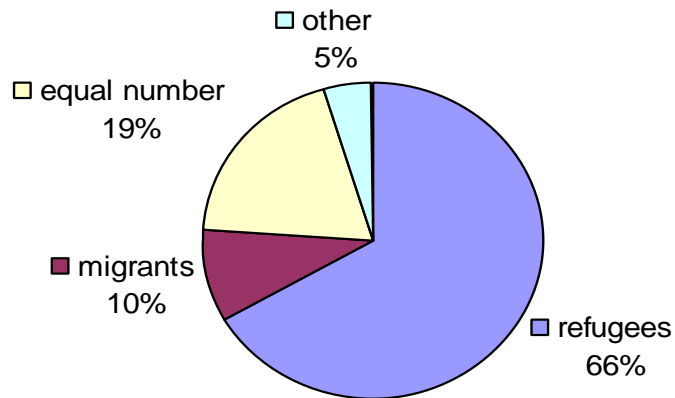
- desk research, including independent reports, conference presentations, internal documents. A bibliography is attached at Appendix A.
- interviews with the Unit's Chief Executive and Sectoral Development Manager
- structured discussion with members of the Unit's Development Team
- on-line survey, sent to the Unit's members and others who attended the conference, a total of 113. 21 responses (19%) were received. (The sample size was limited largely by constraints of time). The survey was hosted and analysed by Eazymultimedia.

The research was carried out in April 2009 and the report finalised in May of that year.

Scope

There is as yet little research on specifically migrant organisations, especially those serving new communities from the European accession countries. The Evelyn Oldfield Unit has decided to extend its services to migrant organisations, having started by working only with those that defined themselves as refugee community organisations (RCOs). As we shall see, the immigration status of its users is not the main concern of community organisations, and many, such as the Latin American organisations, have always served both groups; others such as Polish groups have found themselves shifted from one category to the other.

Our online survey found the following breakdown of service users amongst responding organisations:



refugees: 14; migrants: 2; equal numbers of each: 4; other: 1

For all these reasons, this report relies principally on information regarding RCOs and those that serve both groups. Where the needs and nature of the two diverge I have pointed this out.

1 The nature of RMCOs

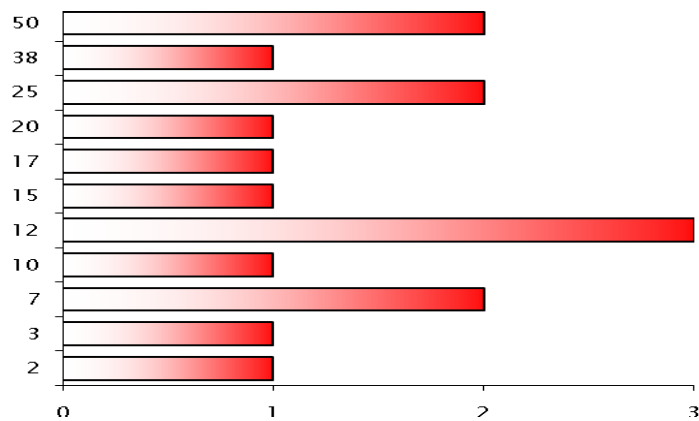
To understand the character of refugee and migrant community organisations, it helps to start with the communities they serve. At once we find considerable diversity: amongst migrants, legal and undocumented; between migrants and refugees; between long-established and new communities; between English-speaking former colonies and those with no previous connection to the UK, and so on. These divergent factors are demonstrated in the demands made on the organisation, its effectiveness in representing the interests of its community, its capacity to attract funding, and its ability to respond to the requirements of what funders it can find. The range of RMCOs is perhaps the most significant fact to bear in mind when considering the present and the future of the sector.

Within this range however there are still commonalities. RMCOs arise from within their communities as a response to needs that their founders have themselves experienced. They are typically founded by the most highly educated and proactive members of the community, who having survived exile, arrival and settlement have a strong sense of obligation to help others with these processes. There may be an overt political intention – some RMCOs map precisely onto political movements in the home country. There is also, quite legitimately, a personal need to find meaningful engagement and a sense of self-worth in a situation that can seem designed to remove both.

One characteristic of RMCOs is often overlooked: the joint focus on the UK and the country of origin. Individuals, even on extremely low incomes, support the extended family at home with remittances, and these in turn often form a large element of that country's economy. Political and social events at home have an impact on communities here, through relatives and friends: witness the current (April 2009) situation in northern Sri Lanka and the public demonstrations by Tamil communities here.

The sense of commitment to the community gives rise to one of the great strengths of RMCOs: their resilience. A very high proportion of the work of RMCOs is voluntary. Funding is limited: a recent survey¹ showed that 63% of organisations existed on less than £50,000 per annum, and only 6% over £200,000. Given the volume and range of demand for their services, RMCOs have to rely heavily on voluntary labour. Our online survey showed organisations with between 2 and 50 active volunteers:

¹ Refugee Community Organisations in England – Realising Potential. Refugee Council & Refugee Action, 2007



Volunteers may provide welfare advice and advocacy and interpreting services, lobby for their community with statutory authorities, teach mother-tongue and supplementary classes, represent the organisation externally and carry out financial and administrative functions. It is not uncommon for RMCOs whose funding is cut to continue offering the same services on a voluntary basis.

By the same token, the service-led culture and the lack of paid infrastructure mean that many RMCOs find it hard to meet the requirements of funders. Fundraising itself is a skilled task, culturally specific and extremely time-consuming, and volunteers, however intelligent and willing, find it hard to produce convincing applications. Similarly the processes of accountability and monitoring, which seem routine to large statutory organisations, can be hard to maintain when there is no dedicated admin function and caseworkers are overstretched.

In the work they do, however, RMCOs can be highly effective. Their workers, paid or voluntary, develop skills and knowledge in a range of subject areas – immigration, housing, social security, healthcare, education and so on. They deliver services not only in the mother tongue of their service users – something that statutory services still find difficult, even with the most common community languages - but in ways that are culturally accessible: doing without appointment systems, for example, or subject specialisms that require a ‘case’ to be handled piecemeal by several services. At their best, RMCOs are subtle and skilled generalists, negotiating between the cultures of the mainstream and the community, interpreting expectations and assumptions, and starting an evolving flow of communication between the individual and the host society.

2 Surviving recession: funding

The existing funding situation

The Refugee Council/Refugee Action survey found a total of 668 refugee community organisations in England, of which 335 were in London.² (I have not found research on the numbers and nature of specifically migrant organisations). 202, or 60%, of the London RCOs responded to the survey. Given the constraints on small and under-funded organisations cited above, it is possible that only the most developed RCOs responded. 127 had been in existence for more than five years, and 24 for more than twenty. 85 had at least one fulltime paid member of staff.

Income at July 2007 was as follows:

<i>Income level</i>	<i>No. of RCOs</i>
less than £50,000	121
£50,000 - £200,000	39
over £200,000	21
not revealed	21

For the scope and depth of work carried out by these organisations, these resources are low. RMCOs have always been under-funded compared to other providers of similar services, and indeed may at times have contributed this, by costing their services too low. Most however feel strongly that there are considerable unmet needs within their community, and that they could achieve more with greater funding.

What is significant here is that the recession is not creating a sudden dearth of funding for an otherwise thriving sector. Competition for funds has grown over the period that RMCOs have been developing, and availability has diminished. The same report identified a number of barriers to getting funding, including:

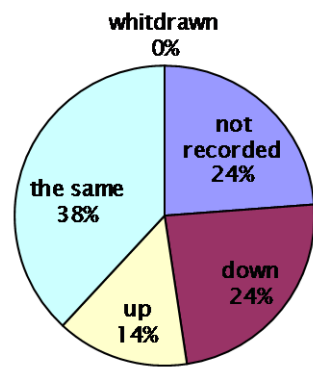
- reported poor quality applications
- language
- perceived duplication of services
- poor financial management, especially budgeting
- poor governance³

Whether these are a matter of fact or of funders' perception scarcely matters, since in either case they influence decision-making, and will need to be addressed in some way if funders are to release resources to RMCOs.

We asked our survey respondents whether their funding had changed since last year:

² *ibid*, p.18

³ *ibid*, p.13



same: 8; up: 3; down: 5; withdrawn: 0; not recorded: 5

Some explained how they had coped with reduced funding:

- Our fundings in the last year mainly came from members and fundraising events with few thousands from funding bodies
- Relying on charitable trusts and spending more time fundraising
- We made staff redundant

All of these three options seem likely to be adopted increasingly as the recession is felt.

A workshop at the Unit's *Surviving Recession* conference looked specifically at RMCOs' perception of the impact on themselves and their communities. Feedback indicated that participants were aware of the potential impact but had not yet felt it.

Projected impact of recession

Speakers at the conference highlighted the specific financial risk to RMCOs from the recession. The Chief Executive of one major funding trust⁴ providing the following facts about trust funding, on which most RMCOs rely heavily:

- Trusts provide 10% of third Sector income
- London's top 25 trusts give over £70 million
- 80% of trusts reported a decrease in asset bases since 06/08
- 50% are keeping to the previous year's budget
- 30% might change their grants policy

At the same time, he suggested, the public sector will face a squeeze which will impact on third sector funding; and corporate donors are already reducing funding and pro bono assistance. As a result of this, all funders are likely to focus on already identified priorities, so that RMCOs will need to tailor their applications accordingly.

⁴ City Parochial Foundation

3 Surviving recession: demand for services

Existing demand

With or without a recession, there is considerable demand for the services of most RMCOs. Evidence gathered by the Greater London Authority⁵ suggests a population of 600,000 refugees who arrived after 1989, or 7% of the city's population. Figures for migrants are hotly contested, but one survey quoted approvingly by the Greater London Authority cites a total of 900,000 people born outside the UK arriving after 1990; if 600,000 are refugees, most of the remaining 300,000 are presumably other migrants.⁶

As well as the pressures on refugees and migrants that result from their particular situation, there are issues that are generic to the life in London. A recent report⁷ points out that London has the highest income poverty in England, the highest rate of youth unemployment, and ten times the national average rate of homelessness. Poverty and ethnicity are closely linked, with 40% of Londoners from BME backgrounds living in low-income households. Refugees and migrants inevitably share in these areas of deprivation.

Some issues particularly affect new arrivals:

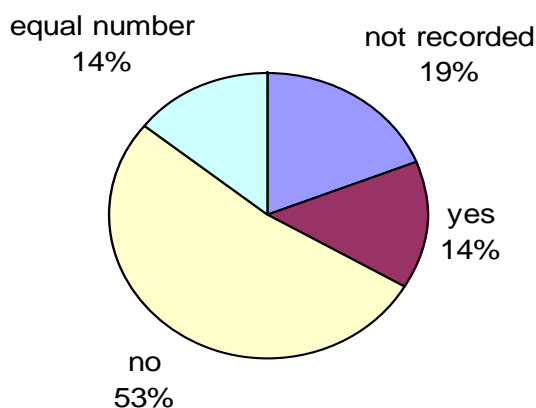
- **unemployment and under-employment.** Asylum seekers are not permitted to work; others may have permission but have difficulty in finding any or suitable employment. In some communities this extends to the second generation, where even graduates find themselves driving minicabs. Our survey showed that the majority of users were unemployed:

⁵ London Enriched: The Mayor's Strategy for Refugee Integration in London: Reference Document: Supporting Evidence for the Strategy

⁶ Estimating London's New Migrant Population: Stage 1 – review of methodology. Rees & Boden/Mayor of London. September 2006

⁷ London's Poverty Profile: MacInnes & Kenway/City Parochial Foundation, 2009

Are the people you see mainly in work?



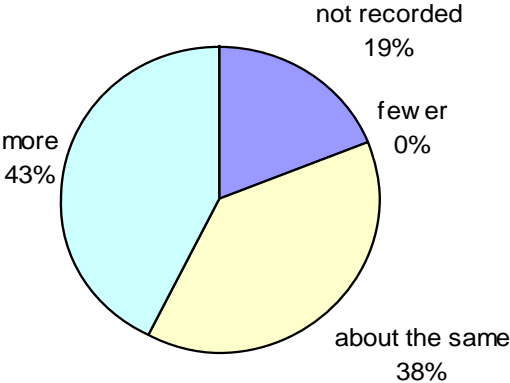
no: 11; yes: 3; equal numbers in work & not: 3; not recorded: 4

- **housing.** New migrants are most likely to be in private rented accommodation, with all the questions of high rents, security of tenure, disrepair, overcrowding, eviction and harassment that this can entail. Research suggests that many refugees are not aware of their rights in relation to housing. Homelessness is also a problem, particularly (and ironically) for those who have a positive decision on their asylum claim.
- **health.** Many migrants and refugees don't understand the structure of the healthcare system or how to access care for themselves. In addition language difficulties make detailed and accurate discussion with health professionals difficult. There are also conditions such as TB that are more common amongst all disadvantaged groups, and some that may be prevalent in countries of origin. Refugees may be suffering the physical or psychological effects of persecution, torture or imprisonment.
- **education.** Some refugee families find it hard to get a school place for their children. Parents may not understand the school's culture of learning, expectations or practical requirements.
- **immigration.** The wait, often prolonged, for a decision on an asylum application is extremely stressful and often bewildering. Finding a suitable solicitor, understanding what s/he is doing on their behalf and judging whether this is adequate, providing the right information and evidence and dealing with the consequences of the outcome are all highly demanding. Undocumented migrants are likely to be in a state of permanent anxiety that they will be found and deported.
- **harassment.** There is evidence of anti-refugee and racial harassment, as well as the sexual harassment of women.
- **language.** Underpinning much of the above is the frustrating and humiliating effect of not being able to communicate in the host country language. Although recent government pronouncements emphasise the need for refugees and migrants to learn English, many are unable to access ESOL courses, with some London colleges having a waiting list of over a thousand people.

Impact of dispersal

All of these issues – and more – are reflected in the workload of RMCOs. There has been an assumption that with the dispersal of newly arrived asylum seekers outside London, demand for RCO services would have diminished. This seems to not be the case with the communities we surveyed:

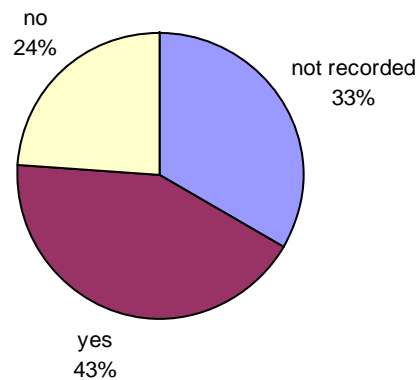
Are you seeing more people than last year?



more: 9; about the same; 8; fewer: 0; not recorded: 4

RCOs have never worked only with asylum seekers, since the issues listed above don't cease with the asylum decision; and some, such as housing, may worsen. In addition, despite pressure to the contrary, many people on receiving a positive decision come to London where they can be sure of the presence of a community and where they may feel less visible.

We also asked whether service users were bringing the same type of problem as in the previous year:



yes: 9; no: 5; not recorded: 7

Some added:

- There are fewer fresh asylum applicants and the needs of the existing service users differ from time to time
- Due to the new economic situation
- Recession and less support for vulnerable groups
- The types of problem have changed. It is now about the needs of their grown up children. It is about ageing, about long term living in this country, financial matters

Evelyn Oldfield Unit staff reinforced the latter point, citing parents deskilled by not understanding the institutions their children have to engage with, including in some cases the criminal justice system. RMCOs have a role in explaining procedures and providing emotional support in this painful and potentially self-perpetuating situation.

Destitution

Recent legislation that leaves people with a negative asylum decision destitute has put more pressure on communities. As the Refugee Council/Refugee Action report says:

A further impact of asylum and refugee policy has been the increasing numbers of unsuccessful asylum seekers who are unable or unwilling to return home and have no access to state support. The Government makes a stark distinction between asylum seekers, whom it wishes to deter from coming to the UK, and refugees, who's (*sic*) right to remain is recognised and whose integration is promoted. RCOs, on the other hand, see only individuals who belong to their community, and their limited capacity is severely strained by the harsh regime for asylum seekers and unsuccessful asylum seekers.⁸

One survey respondent put the situation of many RMCOs and their users poignantly:

⁸ op cit, p.10

- Most of the problems remain unsolved because of lack of resources on our part and because of the complex nature of the problems. We try to signpost them to other services but they are still not content.

This comment is worth remembering when considering the issue of mainstreaming services.

Projected impact: demand

One speaker at the *Surviving Recession*⁹ conference outlined some of the potential effects of recession on refugee and migrant communities.

- Migrants and refugees more likely to lose work than UK-born – Somalia-born employment fallen to 21 per cent of working age population from 29 per cent at end of 2007.
- Pressure on migrants to work for less than minimum wage.
- No evidence of large scale exodus of migrants from UK, because some home countries also badly hit
- Greater destitution, as not all migrants are entitled to benefits and not all migrants can go home. Asylum overstayers more vulnerable. Anti-migration sentiments coalesce around ‘they take our jobs’ ‘British jobs for British workers’.
- These sentiments may exacerbate local community tensions.
- Government may want to be seen as even tougher on migrants, including refugees. Less political space for regularisation or for other pro-refugee policy changes
- Large public debt will result in major public spending cuts for a substantial period. ‘Luxuries’ like MRCO (*sic*) funding cut. No more ESOL money in the pot.

These predictions are based on analysis of the impact of previous recessions on refugee and migrant communities. It remains to be seen how accurate they prove to be. Workshop participants at the conference did not have the mechanisms to measure increased demand because of recession, though like the speaker they could foresee it.

⁹ Jill Rutter, Institute of Public Policy Research

4 Expectations

Cohesion and integration

Recent government documents have been generous in their praise of RMCOs, though not always for the kinds of work that the organisations themselves most prize. *Integration Matters*, the Home Office's 2004 paper, for instance cites the 'enormously valuable work of RCOs' which 'build links between refugees and the wider community.'¹⁰ The official emphasis on community cohesion, and the accompanying attack on the use of interpreting services and translated materials, may sit uncomfortably with RMCOs' core work of assisting those who from anxiety, lack of information or limited language skills are unable to access mainstream services on their own.

Community cohesion and integration are of course complex concepts, though not always treated as such. Is a monocultural community (if there are still any) by definition cohesive? Is it cohesive when it's run out of objects of envy, justifiable or otherwise? Is a Northern Irish labourer in a middle-class English market town integrated? And what exactly are migrants and refugees expected to integrate to? The co-ordinator of one Purposeful Activities Fund project in a Northern dispersal town pointed out that asylum seekers were lodged on an estate where the majority of their neighbours were long-term unemployed, and involved with alcohol, drugs and violent behaviour: was that the culture new arrivals were meant to join?

It is worth bearing these conundrums in mind when considering the expectation that RMCOs will contribute to cohesion and foster integration. Arguably, many of the services that would help promote integration are beyond the capacity of RMCOs to deliver: professional ESOL training, for example, cited by many as the single most important contributor to integration.¹¹ Equally, if using mainstream rather than dedicated services is a measure of integration, the scarcity of mainstream advice services and the existing pressures on them make the wholesale referral of refugees and migrants to them impractical.

Single group funding

There is nevertheless a strong pressure to move from specialised to generalist services, not least because of perceptions in the host community that minority ethnic groups are both inward-looking and over-privileged. The Singh Commission (the Independent Commission on Integration and Cohesion) recommends a presumption against funding groups that cater for a single ethnic, religious or cultural group. It is not yet clear whether this will become government or local policy. In 2008 a High Court ruling challenged the move away from single group funding, saying:

There is no dichotomy between funding specialist services and cohesion; equality is necessary for cohesion to be achieved.¹²

¹⁰ *op cit*, p.22

¹¹ London Enriched. The Mayor's draft strategy for refugee integration in London. Report on the consultation, p.15

¹² Lord Justice Moses in *R v LB Ealing*. The case involved the proposal to cut funding to Southall Black Sisters, which supports Black and Asian women suffering domestic violence.

Nevertheless, the concept of single group funding as a bar to cohesion may not completely vanish. In the light of this, one guide¹³ recommends that RMCOs and their funders address the following:

- If the service is to meet needs for people who cannot yet be expected to access mainstream services easily, such as new migrants, does it include an element which will help them to access mainstream services in the future (rather than encourage continued dependency on the special service)?
- If the need is for a culturally sensitive service, can the need be specified clearly and the additional requirements compared with a mainstream service made clear?
- Can such a service be delivered in a way that promotes integration, for example by offering the service more widely and to different communities?
- Can the project or service be used to influence mainstream provision or facilitate access to it, for example by helping people with paperwork or by showing mainstream providers what the gaps are in their services?
- Is the organisation providing the service engaged with other communities and can it show how its services contribute to community cohesion more widely?

Some of these are arguably issues that RMCOs should be considering, irrespective of the demands of funders. The question of encouraging dependency is a vital – and subtle – one for all helping services, mainstream or otherwise. When passionately committed staff gain their sense of identity in part from being helpful, there can be an unconscious assumption that people are in need of that help, and that it is not available from anyone else. To recognise when someone who has needed help can now manage with less or none is not always easy, especially when that person feels deskilled. But migrants and refugees almost by definition feel deskilled, and anyone really supporting them needs to challenge that feeling, in the right way and at the right time.

There is also the uncomfortable question of how well the staff, volunteers and trustees of an RMCO are themselves linked into mainstream culture/s. If they find statutory services bewildering, native British people off-putting, or the culture they observe on television repellent, their capacity or willingness to encourage others to engage will be limited.

Some RMCOs have already diversified to meet needs beyond their own community. Latin American groups with Portuguese-speaking staff may extend their services to Angolans; some women's organisations serve people from adjacent countries; employment projects have been opened to all comers, from whatever background; and some single-ethnicity services have simply widened to assist any refugees. There is certainly a willingness, if not eagerness, in many RMCOs to meet the requirement to diversify. But many RMCOs are already overburdened with demand from within their own community, without seeking more.

Attempting to influence mainstream provision, on the other hand, is a role that most RMCOs already take on. Many take part in local consultation meetings and voluntary sector forums, respond to consultation documents and contact service providers direct

¹³ More Responsive Public Services? A guide to commissioning migrant and refugee community organisations. HACT/Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008. p.15

on key issues. There is however some frustration about the limited impact of these measures in proportion to the time they take. For a Co-ordinator who is the only paid staff member in an RMCO, and who needs to be available to service users as well as carrying out all the management and admin functions, a half-day meeting is a major investment of time. It is of course unreasonable to expect immediate results from every contact; but there is a real question about the effectiveness of the normal means of influencing statutory authorities. RMCOs may need to hone their skills, or perhaps to be more ambitious in their strategies.

Commissioning

A further shift in policy and practice that has a serious impact on RMCOs is the move from grant funding to the commissioning of services. The HACT/Joseph Rowntree report considers this issue in detail, with the assumption that both commissioners and RMCOs will need to review their modes of operation if this is to be successful.

At its most reductive, commissioning poses a threat to the essence not only of RMCOs, but of the whole voluntary and community sector. Third sector organisations come into being to meet needs that are unmet and, more importantly, unrecognised. An authority can only commission services to meet needs that it has already formulated. Although the same could be said of grant funding, in practice many authorities in the past have been willing to give organisations the benefit of the doubt, and to fund them to provide whatever services they think fit. This has allowed the third sector to be responsive to new and unpredicted needs, without having to renegotiate funding agreements. Commissioning, with its more rigorous monitoring requirements, makes such responsiveness far more difficult. New and smaller communities, unpopular causes and culturally specific working practices are all likely to find it harder to gain funding under this regime. Organisations may find themselves providing the services commissioners want, rather than those they themselves believe most vital.

The solution, or at least the mitigating action, is a virtuous circle of communication between the commissioning authorities and RMCOs, where changing and increasing needs are highlighted throughout the year, so that commissioning decisions are made on the basis of comprehensive and up-to-date information. This again requires a level of engagement and input from RMCOs that some may find hard to maintain. Second-tier organisations and RMCO forums may need to take on some of this involvement, particularly on behalf of smaller organisations.

5 Priorities for the Evelyn Oldfield Unit

The aim of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit is ‘to develop specialist support for refugee and migrant organisations to enable them to adequately tackle the pressing needs of the communities they serve.’ A workshop at the *Surviving Recession* conference asked participants to identify interventions the Unit might usefully make. Suggestions were:

- need to highlight the vulnerable communities in times of recession so voices are heard
- informing RMCOs about economic situation and the impact, and do it honestly
- need to communicate with RMCOs on challenging the way they work (partnership work with mainstream). Even in difficult times there is opportunity
- campaign to highlight the importance of voluntary and community and how they contribute to mainstream services. EOU needs to highlight good practice to decision makers

These proposals are largely reflected in this report, which suggests a number of priority areas for the Unit’s development work in the coming year.

1 supporting good governance

All the social conditions described in this report place a requirement on the Trustees of RMCOs to govern their organisations with vision, awareness and diligence. If good intentions were ever enough to keep an organisation afloat, they are not now. Trustees of RMCOs are generally the people in their community with the most skill and commitment, and accordingly face considerable demands on their time. Finding ways to engage them that are both effective and practicable is an ongoing challenge for the Unit.

2 supporting self-assessment

To survive in the current funding situation, RMCOs will need to demonstrate the impact they have on their communities. The Unit can helpfully work with RMCOs to develop evaluation tools that are both effective and manageable.

3 developing a voice

In the general noise of recession and xenophobia, it is harder than ever for refugees and migrants to be heard. RMCOs will need to develop new ways of influencing public policy, and the Unit can help them to do this: encouraging individuals to stand in local elections, for instance, or using local media more effectively. The Unit itself will continue to advocate for the sector and to showcase its successes.

4 thinking creatively about cohesion and integration

Constant demand can make it hard for RMCOs to look at life in the UK in holistic terms. The Unit can raise awareness of the nature of belonging and citizenship, and the possibilities of constructive engagement. This may include further debate on the nature of integration and on the indicators that have validity for RMCOs and their constituents.

5 enabling research

The Unit can assist both RMCOs and statutory authorities by piloting innovative ways of researching the make-up, size and concerns of refugee and migrant communities. This

may also extend to monitoring the impact of recession on RMCOs and disseminating the findings.

6 making commissioning work

The HACT/Rowntree report provides a comprehensive basis for work with both RMCOs and commissioning authorities. The Unit may want to offer workshops and/or surgeries for RMCOs, and to find ways to disseminate best practice amongst commissioners.

7 facilitating partnership working

Many RMCOs are keen – and/or are under pressure – to work in partnership with similar or mainstream organisations. The Unit can facilitate this, by suggesting appropriate partner organisations, briefing RMCOs on making partnerships work, and providing support if there are difficulties.

8 gathering information on migrant communities

There is little information available at present on new migrant communities, their needs or their organisations. If the Unit is to engage fully with migrant as well as refugee communities, it will need to highlight what research there is, or to sponsor research itself, and make use of it in its service planning.

APPENDIX A

Evelyn Oldfield Unit online questionnaire

- 1 Are the people who use your services:
mainly refugees?
mainly migrants?
about equal numbers?
other?
- 2 Do you see:
mainly women?
mainly men?
about equal numbers?
mainly children?
- 3 Are the people you see mainly in work?
yes
no
about equal numbers
- 4 Are you seeing more people than last year?
fewer?
about the same numbers?
- 5 Are people coming to you with the same type of problem as last year?
yes
no.
If no, what's different?
- 6 If there are differences (in numbers of people or types of problem), how have you coped?
- 7 How many paid staff do you have?
- 8 Is that the same as last year?
fewer?
more?
- 9 How many active volunteers do you have (including Board members who work with service users)?
- 10 Do you have funding?
yes
no
- 11 Since last year, has your total funding:
gone up?
gone down?
stayed the same?
been completely withdrawn?

12 If your funding has gone down or been completely withdrawn, how have you coped?

APPENDIX B

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