

REFUGEE INTEGRATION

Opportunities and Challenges

Report of a conference organised by the
Co-ordinators Training and Support
Scheme (COTASS), a forum of the
Evelyn Oldfield Unit, held in July 2003





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Report of the conference held on 16th July 2003
at the Voluntary Sector Resource Centre,
356 Holloway Road, London N7 6PA

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INTRODUCTION

Refugees bring skills and experience to their new country and want to be able to use them in order to contribute to and become active members of society. This conference, organised by the Co-ordinators Training and Support Scheme (COTASS) was a chance for refugees and the community organisations that they are involved with to share their ideas with academics, funding organisations and other agencies. They first looked at the hurdles that make it difficult for refugee communities to integrate. Then they discussed positive steps by which refugees, community organisations, the government and all the other agencies they are in touch with can recognise their value and give them the chance to be equal participants in the society of which they are now members.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This conference was supported by funding from the Refugee Integration Unit of the Home Office and from Awards for All.

THE PROGRAMME

9.30am	Registration
10.00am	Introduction and welcome Jack Shieh OBE
10.10am	Opening session Panel discussion followed by questions and comments from the floor. Chair Gladys Jusu-Sheriff Panel Mulat Tadesse Haregot, Sir Bernard Crick and Anba Ali
11.20am	Coffee
11.35am	Second session: Panel discussion followed by questions and comments from the floor. Chair Mohamed Maigag Panel Bharti Patel and Bharat Mehta
1.00pm	Lunch
2.00pm	Workshops 1 The voice of refugee communities 2 Opportunities and challenges for refugees 3 The contribution of refugee communities to the host society 4 The expectations of refugee communities
3.15pm	Tea
3.30pm	Final session Report back and discussion Chair Tzeggai Yohannes Deres Summing-up and conclusion Elahe Panahi
4.30pm	Conference ends

OPENING SESSION: THE CURRENT SITUATION

JACK SHIEH OBE, Chair of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and member of the COTASS Steering Committee, welcomed the guest speakers and participants and outlined the purpose of the conference: to explore both the opportunities and the challenges of refugee integration.

In the opening session a panel of eminent speakers discussed the issues facing refugees who are attempting to integrate into the society of their new country.

GLADYS JUSU-SHERRIFF, a trustee of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, was in the chair.

THE PANEL

MULAT TADESSE HAREGOT, Chair of COTASS and Centre Manager of the Ethiopian Advice and Support Centre

SIR BERNARD CRICK, Chair of Life in the United Kingdom Advisory Group to the Government on the implementation of the education for naturalisation provisions of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002

ANBA ALI, Director of Refugees Into Jobs and Trustee of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit

GLADYS JUSU-SHERRIFF thanked COTASS – the Co-ordinators Training and Support Scheme – for organising the conference, which aimed to crystallise what refugee integration means for all those involved. Describing her arrival in Britain six years ago, she said she had received confidential help and support from the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, which was a source of inspiration and encouragement.

MULAT TADESSE HAREGOT thanked Professor Sir Bernard Crick for his support then went on to say that COTASS was approaching its 10th anniversary – it was set up in 1994 by the then recently founded Evelyn Oldfield Unit.

He described the conference as unique in several different ways. Firstly, it brings together refugee community organisation (RCO) leaders, policymakers, distinguished academics, funding organisations, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the media and other agencies and organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers. Secondly, it coincides with the start of a challenge in the High Court to Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, which denies basic accommodation and subsistence support to asylum seekers if they do not claim asylum on arrival in this country. Thirdly, this conference complements the Home Office UK National Integration conference which was held in Birmingham at the end of June. Fourthly, it is taking place on the eve of the launch of the report on the Life in the United Kingdom Independent Advisory Group, chaired by Professor Sir Bernard Crick.



Mulat outlined the history and achievements of COTASS, which was set up to assist leaders of refugee community organisations; to learn from other agencies involved with refugees; to provide training for organisations dealing with refugees; and to inform society about refugee issues.

COTASS is now a leading refugee forum in the UK and its persistence in campaigning and advocating for refugees and asylum seekers is appreciated by RCOs, refugee agencies and the Home Office. On this basis, two years ago, COTASS was invited to be a representative on the National Refugee Integration Forum, chaired by the Home Office Minister, and has been playing a key role by informing policy and establishing a network with government departments, police, voluntary organisations and academic and research institutions.

In the last three years COTASS has also established working relationships with the Refugee Council and Refugee Action, to share information about how to promote the interests and meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

In the last four years, the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, through COTASS, has invested highly in the six west London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow, to establish refugee forums and the West London Refugee Partnership (WESTREP).

COTASS members have also played a pivotal role in initiating, designing, developing and shaping the strategy of Renewal, a partnership of RCOs and government agencies in west London. Renewal was set up by refugee community organisations, refugee forums and statutory sector partners in 2000, in response to the frustration with public services suffered by new arrivals. There was untapped potential in RCOs to address issues of health, employment, training and services for young refugees and their families.

COTASS members involved in West London refugee forums argued that Renewal should be ‘owned by refugees’, because they are best placed to identify and to solve the problems of their own communities. In practice this means that Renewal funds RCOs but does not fund Local Authority, NHS or other statutory sector projects. More than 85% of Renewal’s funding goes directly to RCOs in the form of small capacity-building grants up to a half-million pound employment project. More than 30 RCO projects are up and running and the determination of the RCOs has brought every project to full operation so far. This was an example of effective and well-organised efforts of COTASS members translating the learning into practice.

COTASS has also played a strategic role in developing WESTREP in order to foster a sense of solidarity across the sub-region.

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Mulat Tadesse Haregot



*Renewal is a partnership of RCOs and government agencies in west London.

COTASS is a forum for discussing refugee integration issues and employs facilitators to develop skills and provide learning support to organisations. The Evelyn Oldfield Unit has developed an accredited training scheme run in conjunction with the University of London's Goldsmiths College and Birkbeck College in partnership with The Barbara Melunsky Fund. This is a summary of results of courses that have been held:

Course title	Successful participants
Certificate in Management	35
Certificate in Training	39
Certificate in Counselling	37
Youth Work	9
MA in Voluntary Sector	6
Postgraduate Diploma	18
Common Purpose – Matrix	3
Common Purpose Navigator	3
Common Purpose – Profile	15

As the leading forum of its kind in the UK, COTASS is proactive in linking with agencies and other organisations involved with refugees. It has linked with emerging refugee organisations outside London through the RCO Development Project, and with a WESTREP organisation to provide education and employment opportunities for refugees, as well as working with statutory bodies to assist in refugee integration.

Mulat congratulated Saverimuthu Stanislaus on receiving an MBE in this year's honours list and thanked the keynote speakers, RCO leaders, refugee agencies, statutory organisations and funders. In particular thanks went to the City Parochial Foundation for its continued financial, technical and professional support to the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and for creating a positive environment in which this unique COTASS conference could take place.

This conference is the first step in engaging with policymakers, RCO leaders, researchers, funders and other stakeholders. The aim of COTASS is to maintain and develop this constructive dialogue.

GLADYS JUSU-SHERRIFF introduced Sir Bernard Crick as an Orwellian Scholar and an emissary of the Minister for Refugees. Sir Bernard ensures that ministers are aware of the skills and knowledge refugees bring to the UK, and of the fact that they left their countries because of life-threatening situations. They are crucial in the development of the UK and bring their traditional cultural values with them.

SIR BERNARD CRICK said that he has reservations about government policy on asylum seekers as it may prejudice the issue of work permits. He believes the government has taken a tough stance because they are faced with a difficult political situation: the public are generally not sympathetic to the problems of refugees and immigrants, mainly because of uninformed views fuelled by sections of the media.



He outlined the history of immigration to the UK in the 19th and 20th centuries, long before the arrival of *SS Windrush*. He stated that after the *SS Windrush* influx, immigration controls were tightened up. People from the white Commonwealth were largely unaffected, but those from the New Commonwealth (mainly black people) were subject to controls. In fact, the British public were well used to immigration and some areas, like London's East End, have been home to many immigrant communities. This is why, for example, Tower Hamlets College in East London is the largest provider in the UK of English as a second language (ESOL) teaching.

Professor Crick said that the Government's approach of being tough on false asylum claimants was being undermined through a lack of sufficient immigration staff at high levels and the difficulty the police were in when people's identity was difficult or sensitive to establish on the spot.

Sir Bernard also pointed out that refugees have historically faced the dilemma of whether or not to return to their home countries. Those who have already integrated have built connections in the UK which they may not want to sever; but there are a number who may wish to return once the political situation has stabilised.

Sir Bernard is part of an Implementation Group for the naturalisation provisions of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (NIAA) 2002, following his report entitled *The New and the Old*. He focused on the requirement of the NIAA that all asylum seekers should be tested to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of either the English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic languages and sufficient knowledge of life in the UK, such as how to set up a bank account. He highlighted a major problem, however: asylum seekers and refugees are entitled to some – albeit limited – English language teaching, whereas new arrivals with work permits and their dependents are not.



The Committee felt that integration was certainly not the same as assimilation. Sir Bernard concluded that integration involves acceptance of diversity but also argued that refugee communities should ensure that all family members have the right to learn the English language, even if there were tensions between traditional cultures and UK laws on issues like divorce and child protection. The Committee had found that whilst members of minorities were extremely helpful to people in their own communities, they did not offer advice on life within the UK generally.

ANBA ALI asserted that the first step to integration for refugees is to find employment. Refugees Into Jobs was set up in 1997, working with both refugees and employers in Brent and Harrow, and its main aim was to empower local refugees and asylum seekers through learning and employment. Anba said that 70,000 refugees were living in West London and, in the year 2000, according to Home Office statistics, £2.6 billion in tax revenue had been injected into the economy by overseas workers.

She outlined some of the barriers facing refugees: financial difficulties; child-care costs; lack of work experience in the UK; lack of referees; cultural and social

barriers and the resulting isolation; lack of information; lack of knowledge of the system; lack of good advice; immigration status; housing difficulties; lack of good quality English teaching. To try and tackle some of these problems, Refugees

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Sir Bernard Crick

identification; CV writing and job applications; and the introduction of new concepts, such as team-working. Placing clients in voluntary work also helps to develop their confidence and communication skills.

Into Jobs provides: group advice sessions; one-to-one, in-depth guidance and counselling; advice to employers; research for clients on professional qualifications; financial assistance which is client-oriented (based on need); and financial support when clients obtain a job.

Anba discussed the importance of the Career Focus Programme sessions which take place over five days each month, emphasising confidence building; setting and achieving goals; UK employment market training; skills

The challenges facing Refugees Into Jobs are: funding; the benefits trap; the informal economy; continuously changing legislation; lack of awareness of the potential of individual refugees; the stigma attached to the label 'refugee'; and the work needed to convince employers of their social responsibility towards workers who are refugees.

SUCCESS STORIES

- A young lady who was very shy, was offered work experience at the Refugees Into Jobs office. Eight months later she obtained employment in the financial department of a Housing Association.
- Ms L, a Telecoms Engineer, came to the agency very stressed and in tears after being turned down for a job at Sainsbury's. Refugees into Jobs worked with her on a one-to-one basis two months and she then obtained a job as an engineer for T-Mobile. Four months later was promoted to Team Leader.
- Mr A was on a Refugees Into Jobs programme when the agency was pressurised to transfer some of their clients to other organisations. Mr A returned having been told that he was not serious about trying to find employment. He now works for the Refugee Council.

In the last year, 585 clients have used the services of Refugees into Jobs. Of those, 35% resulted in employment, with an even higher percentage of those with degrees finding work. The agency has found that clients are more successful if they approach the employers themselves and don't say that they are refugees, as there

is a stigma attached to the term. One employer even suggested that they should change the name of the organisation!

The challenge is for employers to shoulder their social responsibilities and recognise that refugees are hardworking and can make a valuable contribution.

The discussion with the audience covered a range of issues.

LEARNING ENGLISH The government says that refugees are entitled to ESOL teaching but this is extremely difficult to finance. One problem facing the DfES is that there is a genuine shortage of professional ESOL teachers and it will be at least two years before the supply can be increased. In Scotland the ESOL curriculum has been recognised and, as a result, brings professional status, public purpose and access to funds.

When Refugees into Jobs started there were lots of ESOL programmes for teachers and engineers. The agency is undertaking a feasibility study for teachers and engineers and has set up a special Teachers Working Group which has put forward a good action plan that, hopefully, will be implemented.

A significant number of refugees are elderly, 99% of whom speak no English. The Act states that the requirement to learn English is waived for elderly and disabled people.

THE STIGMA There are many articles in the tabloid press attacking asylum seekers. This does not encourage employers to see refugees in a positive way. The media plays a major role in tarnishing the image of refugees. Refugees are not bad people! Refugees contribute to the host country's economy; they have a rich cultural background, skills and knowledge. Employers and businesses can play an important role here.

Sir Bernard Crick described the Government as having a 'tough/tender side', saying that this is one of the disadvantages of a democracy. He wished the Government could control the press.

If we could get refugees into employment, the net savings would be enormous. The numbers of refugees coming in with work permits is increasing – these are employment-driven and we should look at the need of the society for particular skills in terms of integration.

The challenges facing Refugees into Jobs are: funding; the benefits trap; the informal economy; continuously changing legislation; lack of awareness of the potential of individual refugees; the stigma attached to the label 'refugee'; and the work needed to convince employers of their social responsibility towards workers who are refugees.

Anba Ali



Integration is a two-way process but a lot of pressure is on the refugees themselves. Learning English and navigating the employment market are part of this. Integration requires education and health, and needs a lot of help and support. At the moment the Government and the media are playing into each others' hands. Integration starts with the service providers and the Government. You can see the impact in the draft summary of *Principle Recommendations* by the Life in the United Kingdom Advisory Group. Sir Bernard Crick said that there is under-funding and he hopes that this will improve.

CHILDCARE Anba Ali said that there are many programmes for childminders, specifically from refugee communities, but these are not very popular, perhaps because of the very low pay. If the minders are relatives, then they will be paid childcare fees.

RECOGNITION OF OVERSEAS QUALIFICATIONS Sir Bernard Crick said that the advisory group was recommending special funding for professionals. There is a register of equivalent qualifications but employers – particularly in medium-sized businesses – are ignorant of the available information. We need to get across to employers that there is this pool of skilled people whilst addressing the employers' responsibility for accelerated English courses.

INTEGRATION AND DIVERSITY Integration is a very broad term. If people go to college, who will represent their culture? They need teachers from their own background to integrate into society. Is there any budget for this?

Sir Bernard Crick said that there has been a shakeup at the Home Office and changes in the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Cultural integration places an obligation upon the host and the refugees to look after themselves, and he did not believe that the Government would spend money to reinforce that process. He used as an example Jewish and Irish immigration and the role of the churches.

As regards the question from the floor about educational institutions supporting refugees' cultures, some colleges do better than others. There are people who offer mentoring within the community but they will not succeed if they don't find out about the background of the people they are working with: their country, its politics and culture, and children's libraries have some very good, simple books on different cultures.

SECOND SESSION: HOW AGENCIES CAN SUPPORT INTEGRATION

MOHAMED MAIGAG, COTASS Vice-chair and Trustee of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, welcomed the guest speakers. He described his arrival in the UK as a refugee in 1985, when immigration policies were more tolerant, and said he had benefited from the management courses provided by COTASS. He asked: what is integration? An acceptance of diversity.

THE PANEL

BHARTI PATEL¹, Senior Officer on Immigration at the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE)

BHARAT MEHTA, Clerk to the Trustees of City Parochial Foundation (CPF)

RACHEL REYNOLDS², National Integration Forum, (Head of the Refugee Integration Unit of the Home Office)

BHARTI PATEL described the huge overlap between race and immigration issues. The 1976 Race Relations Act had provided a good lever for individuals to take up cases of discrimination over services, education and housing but there was much more work to be done on race inequality in the workplace, particularly now that attitudes were hardening against immigrants and asylum seekers.

She stated that the media was generating a steady stream of anti-asylum feelings, and that new arrivals to the UK faced a myriad of disadvantages, such as very high rates of unemployment.

In the Burnley Council elections, asylum was the issue that brought in the British National Party (BNP). The Far Right has used the issue to play on people's fears even though there are fewer than 50 asylum seekers in Burnley. There are also rising rates of racial harassment and bullying of children in schools.

Access to funding is still a great problem – the CRE has not taken this area of policy seriously enough. It has been criticised for not using its law enforcement powers with regard to discrimination and, in the past, for its narrow perspective on race. Some of this criticism is justified, however the CRE must now start to prioritise the issues faced by asylum seekers.

The regulations on race are wrapped up with globalisation – they are connected to conflicts in other parts of the world. In the UK this affects communities that the CRE has not dealt with before, such as those from the former Soviet Union and the Middle East.

The CRE has the power to make a difference to asylum seekers and refugees. Trevor Phillips, the new chair, is seeking to change attitudes, to stem the flow of

¹ Replaced Trevor Phillips who was unable to attend due to a prior engagement.

² Called away on urgent Home Office business on the day.

anti-asylum hysteria and to connect with all the communities concerned. He is promoting an approach based on the mandate of communities – but refugees are constrained by a lack of resources.

Bharti said that she had been seconded to help work out what the role of the organisation should be. She is putting together an immigration and asylum strategy, and

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Bharti Patel

will decide what the organisation will do over next year or so, but recommends that the CRE must speak to community organisations in order to pick up on their concerns and move them on. Bharti believes that progress is being made.

At the moment the CRE is looking at how NASS and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office fit into the new Race and Equalities Framework. As part of this legislation, the CRE has the

power to monitor the performance of 43 statutory authorities, which are expected to consult with refugee organisations and will try to ensure that they do so.

They are also looking at the private sector to try and remove some of the barriers faced by refugees to access to services such as bank accounts. They are trying to raise awareness by working with umbrella groups.

In general the race relations legislation is a real lever for advocates and individuals to challenge discrimination. How can the CRE challenge some of the problems people face on a day to day basis? The organisation is changing. It has come a long way but there is more to do. Bharti Patel asked participants to be part of that process: to define what should be done; come and speak to the CRE; carry on criticising the organisation so it can improve its work.

BHARAT MEHTA talked about the contribution of funders in relation to integration strategy. He did not see integration as being the same as assimilation but as a two-way process, where the systems, processes and cultures of communities changed with a view to better understanding and, hopefully, happy coexistence. However, he did not see this as an equal process since the dominant culture would almost always overwhelm the minority culture over a period of time.

So far the conference had focused on the preservation of culture with a view to working in harmony. Bharat was not sure everyone was being completely honest about this. Can cultures really be preserved in aspic, in the form that they existed in our countries of origin at the time we left? Is integration a state of being or an objective end? Could one put a finger on the moment when one is fully integrated or is it more elusive and transient – can one sometimes feel integrated and at other times feel excluded?



Bharat explained that the City Parochial Foundation (CPF) was an endowed foundation with its own assets, where the trustees decide the funding priorities. It was a very privileged position but he hoped that the CPF had used this freedom in a constructive way. The CPF had founded both the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and the Resource Unit for Mother Tongue and Supplementary Schools. From the perspective of an independent grant-maker, Bharat said his talk was going to concentrate on integration as a way of enabling an individual to feel as much a part of the community and society in which he or she lives as someone who was born and brought up here. He was clear that integration is not an overnight process nor, indeed, an absolute one.

Bharat outlined Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs: at the bottom of the triangle are basic needs such as food, shelter and safety; at the top are self-actualisation – feeling secure in yourself, being able to make a positive contribution to society, to be valued. It is difficult to think about issues at the apex unless the foundation is secure.

He explained that funders could help in overcoming some of the concrete issues at the base of the triangle. These include funding organisations providing advice, employment training, language skills, housing, advice on benefits and rights and so on. Community refugee organisations could be funded to provide this or, alternatively, generic voluntary organisations could be funded to push these issues into the mainstream. The latter generally had more resources and experience and it was important that they became aware of the issues and concerns of new communities. They may also benefit from the new experiences and be able to pass them on to other agencies and other clients.

Funders could also help with the organic aspects of integration that involve some of the issues at the apex of the triangle. Increasing the visibility of refugee communities in positive roles was one. Enabling members of refugee communities to work in high profile jobs – such as doctors, pharmacists and accountants – could be another. Oddly, being seen to be challenging some of our own practices could also be positive. Examples here could include challenging our attitudes towards lesbians and gay men or on female genital mutilation. After all, said Bharat, a culture that is ossified is a dead culture.

He also said that it was important to fund poor white communities. Often these communities had been forgotten and were severely deprived. This made them prime

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Bharat Mehta



targets for right wing political groups. Funding projects that support these communities is important, said Bharat, and supporting sports and arts projects is a good way of enabling communities to exchange views and attempt to live in harmony.

Bharat concluded by stating that funders do not know all there is to know about refugee communities and integration. They need to be informed so that their funding practices can reflect needs.

The presentation was followed by a discussion from the floor.

How far have we come since the 1980s? Are people willing to face up to the issues rather than avoiding them?

Bharti Patel said that the Race Relations Act had been hailed as a revolution but it could be criticised for making a revolution at the level of process rather than changing hearts and minds.

Bharat Mehta said this was a tricky question but agreed with the sentiment. Race awareness training in the 1980s had made it extremely difficult to talk about racism and did an enormous amount of damage. He was much more keen on institutional and organisational change.

One participant said that the general public are not really interested in an informed debate on this but prefer scapegoating. They recognise that they can't be openly racist, but with asylum seekers they have found a way to express their racism. They just substitute the term 'asylum seeker' for a name used 20 or 30 years ago for black people. There has been lots of talk of integration; this should start from the day asylum seekers arrive in the country.

Refugee groups are different from older, more established immigrant groups such as Asians. What measures are going to be taken to empower and make asylum seekers more aware of their rights? In the 1980s there was race relations training. Now we tend not to challenge racism, but to be more passive in neighbourhoods where this occurs. We need to be more proactive, to train people.

One member of the audience asked how we can challenge the fact that many asylum seekers are offered only 10 hours education in oral English, and also, banks don't accept travel documents of refugee or asylum seekers.

One answer was that children learn very quickly and probably the second generation will be integrated. One starting point, that has come from the Home Office, is the Welcome to Britain integration pack from Sir Bernard Crick that is produced in different languages and given to all asylum seekers. The first step in integration is for people to have information in their own language about how to find schools and so on.

Bharti Patel said we need to try to educate people on how dreadful the situation is and do what we can to address it. There is work that we can do with the public

authorities, as in the amended the Race Relations Act, to ensure that they are fully aware of the diverse communities they serve and that they go out to those communities and make themselves aware of the needs. She said: ‘We can empower you by setting out what the law is, so that you can challenge Local Care Trusts. We have recently changed the way that we fund Race Equality Councils (RECs) and try to work with the communities and to raise awareness.

There are policies that affect asylum seekers: accommodation; who gets to stay or go. And there are a whole range of practices that are not covered by the Race Relations Act. The law is extremely complicated – for asylum seekers there is a huge area of discrimination within the legislation which affects access to GPs, jobs etc. Also funders can look for ways to support orientation programmes where one member of staff is employed to help with homework after school, teach parents about the homework and so on.

Bharat Mehta said that the London *Evening Standard* is really rabid about asylum seekers. The Kings Fund is working on a project for qualified doctors, which has received some really positive coverage. With sound, well-researched information, and irrefutable facts, it’s possible to change attitudes.

The general public are not really interested an informed debate on this but prefer scapegoating. They recognise that they can’t be openly racist, but with asylum seekers they have found a way to express their racism. They just substitute the term ‘asylum seeker’ for a name used 20 or 30 years ago for black people.

Participant

WORKSHOP REPORTS

WORKSHOP 1: THE VOICE OF REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

Facilitator: Mohamed Maigag, Haringey Somali Community and Cultural organisation

KEY POINTS

- Recognition
- Influence and authority
- Participation in and contribution to the fabric of the society
- How acquiring or failing to acquire these attributes can foster or impede the refugee voice

DISCUSSION

1. What is meant by refugee voice?

Refugees are not a homogeneous group.

MPs do not represent all their constituents.

Refugees need to organise themselves to put pressure on MPs.

MPs need to work with other representative bodies to ensure that refugees' voices are heard.

2. What kind of voice do refugee community groups have?

Various existing groups such as the Refugee Council.

Refugees need to share their experiences and be active in the democratic process. Individuals need to be empowered to get involved in local activities such as governing bodies of schools.

The strength and political influence of refugee voices varies within and outside London.

3. What about influence and authority?

Democratic societies have different ways of

participating in the political process, such as through pressure groups, which are complementary to parliament.

4. What kind of representation do refugees need?

Different platforms such as Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) and charities.

Individual representation is needed from all bodies involved in refugee issues, but special events are needed for this to take place.

Build the capacity of individuals to contribute to debate on refugee issues.

Asylum seekers need a platform because all refugees were formerly asylum seekers.

5. How can responsible bodies ensure the empowerment of RCOs?

RCOs and agencies have to acknowledge different needs of refugees and provide sufficient resources to meet them; this requires changes in funding policies.

Refugee organisations need to state their basic aim which is to help individual refugee communities in effecting change.

Cross-borough initiatives and use of networks would increase the voice of refugees by involving more people.

The importance of refugees in research and the media was highlighted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognition of diversity of refugee voices because refugees are not a homogeneous group.

2. Advocacy ensures that refugees and asylum seekers have a voice.

3. A conference to promote good practice in refugee representation including research, decision-making processes and the media.

WORKSHOP 2: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Facilitator: Jack Shieh OBE, Vietnamese Mental Health Services

KEY POINTS

The opportunities

- Leadership
- Civic action, and community and personal development
- Employment and business development
- Access to services such as education, health and housing

The challenges

Lack of adequate information.

Hostile and negative media.

Harsh immigration legislation.

Lack of resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There are opportunities for individuals to **integrate themselves** into society via education, employment etc. Need to challenge the pervasive culture of class categorisation and overcome negative media attention.

This needs a louder voice from refugee communities. RCOs need to make their views strongly felt and record their good practice.

2. Acculturation through language teaching support in the education system. Education of the host community about other cultures and preparation of the people to integrate with the newcomers and to gain an understanding of what values they share and how they differ.

3. Representation must be undertaken by individuals. There is a responsibility to represent the positive aspects of refugees and asylum seekers and to promote realistic discussions. More multi-agency approaches and awareness of all organisations and their functions and the responsibility of refugee organisations to take part in them. Get rid of the victim label. Communities should be more pro-active. More inclusive government policies.

WORKSHOP 3: THE CONTRIBUTION OF REFUGEE COMMUNITIES TO THE HOST SOCIETY

Facilitator: Lynne Gillett, Evelyn Oldfield Unit

KEY POINTS

- Bringing new culture
- Skilled and educated labour
- Investment and contribution to the economy

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Refugees bring work and skills – not just doctors and nurses, though there are 750 doctors whose skills are not being utilised. Refugees' entrepreneurship and initiative mean they are

good at creating their own jobs. But perhaps the jobs they are offered are not wanted by the rest of the labour force? They are in a stressful situation caused by language problems and the fact that they are unable to use their qualifications.

2. Highlight the contributions made by refugees to counteract the negative input from much of the media. In ethnically diverse localities, such as Manchester, Leicester and London, the various communities feel at home and can be creative. Refugees need to penetrate the mainstream more in terms of the arts, culture and society in general.

3. Refugee parents want their children to achieve, so the **second generation** often contributes skills to this country. This can be seen especially in the Asian communities.

WORKSHOP 4: THE EXPECTATIONS OF REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

Facilitator: Jabbar Hasan, Director of the Iraqi Community Association

KEY POINTS

- Equality and fair access to services
- Being treated with dignity and justice
- Recognition and acknowledgement
- Celebration of diversity and respect for national heritage
- Interaction of refugee communities in the life of the wider society

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Respect is a two-way process, from the host community and refugees for each others'

traditions, cultures and customs. The hosts should welcome newcomers, while refugees need to be involved in the activities in the host community. The host community expects refugees to speak English so they can communicate; refugee communities need to be provided with a good language service. Share and celebrate.

2. Refugees should expect to take responsibility and can do so through refugee community organisations.

3. Lots of information within the refugee community in the form of data, experiences, challenges. Agencies need to consult refugee communities when they set up services for them so refugees can influence policy. Many refugees think that they will be here for six months to two years and then go home. In reality, most stay. They need to think about how they can influence policy and be active while they are here.

FINAL SESSION

TZEGGAI YOHANNES DERES, Director of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit introduced the last session. He said: today's conference has marked a significant step for the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and its proactive forum, COTASS (Co-ordinators Training and Support Scheme), in making an immense commitment to be resourceful participants in the evolving debate on integration. As members of the National Integration Forum, chaired by the Home Office, both organisations have a responsibility to share the recommendations of this event with all interested bodies in different sectors.

Integration is a long journey and a two-way process, which requires a mature engagement from all sections of the society. A mature process has a formula, which includes principles, people, procedures and tools. Hence process is what people do using procedures, methods, tools and other equipment in order to transform 'input' into 'outputs'. That is of value to each and every member of society. To maximise the input of the new communities, the responsible body in charge of leading the purpose, needs to be aware of the barrier of exclusion and apply a mature process, which reflects best practice. In our debate, we always fail to properly address the clear definitions, context, mechanisms, resources and underpinning values and principles of the two-way process. What does each way entail both in theory, practice and implementation? What methods do we use to assess the process?

Every one of us participating in this conference has a duty to pass on the message of the conference and to widen awareness on the main issues emerging from the debate and recommendations of the workshops to all relevant groups. The conference could not have been as well-attended, dynamic, useful or accommodating without the contributions that our speakers, facilitators and all the participants have made. Furthermore, it could not have been fully resourced without the grants made by the Refugee Integration Unit of the Home Office, and Awards for All – useful grants for a valuable event.

The management committee and staff of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and members of the steering committee of COTASS have worked very hard to organise this conference. We thank them all. In particular, I thank Emad Salman, Training Manager of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, for playing a significant role in organising the conference and in servicing COTASS meetings and distributing relevant documents.

Special thanks go to our guest speakers: Sir Bernard Crick, Bharti Patel and Bharat Mehta.

CONCLUSION

by Elahe Panahi

Summing up the contributions of our distinguished speakers is not an easy task. I will extract a couple of comments from each of our speakers and add my views which I hope would reflect the view of COTASS.

I first thought of focusing on opportunities and moving on to challenges that refugees face in their process of integration within the receiving community, but I realised that every opportunity for refugees poses a great deal of challenge and therefore these two points have an interactive and organic relationship and can be discussed as they are being experienced by refugees.

Sir Bernard Crick acknowledged the two-way relationship between the hosts and refugees as new members of the community and this is the key to the success of any integration policy. In reality, however, the whole system is set up to help refugees overcome their problems. Government initiatives, the voluntary sector, refugee support agencies and even refugee groups are set up to help refugees to become able to integrate without much pain.

Too much emphasis on helping refugees to deal with their problems has influenced our thinking and sometimes it is hard to separate refugees from their problems and stop talking about refugees as if they *are* the problem. The two-way relationship necessary for healthy integration needs to be established by treating refugees as assets, as people who have something to offer and who can make great contributions in their very small ways.

Anba Ali was an excellent follow-up to Sir Bernard Crick's contribution by focusing on the importance of supporting projects that aim to enable refugees to make use of what they bring to this country and to realise their potential in their new environment. Her interesting case studies were evidence of how, given opportunities, refugees can progress and make a positive contribution.

Integration should not be limited to the people who are ready to be in employment. A traumatised mum, a persecuted and anguished parent, people who may not have immediately transferable skills should not be left behind in this process. Genuine integration should acknowledge different strengths in people and try to accommodate these differences.

Bharat Mehta made the point that minority ethnic communities are expected to operate within a dominant culture and therefore the marriage is not usually a successful one. I share his views that, given the diversity of experiences and circumstances, it is hard to give a clear cut definition of integration; more so because this is a self-defined concept. Newcomers may experience events that make them feel respected and able to develop confidence to feel part of the host community. On the



other hand, threatening and negative experiences generate self-defence and isolation, leading to fragmentation and marginalisation.

Given the complexity of the issue, it is important to discuss integration in a simple and realistic way. Integration should not be about being successful in the labour market, being a high up politician or having a position in a government office. It is about ordinary refugees feeling and experiencing respect and being treated as equal members of the community. My understanding of equality is not sameness. The true essence of equality is to acknowledge differences and try to accommodate these differences for the good of all.

Integration for refugees means moving out of invisibility – becoming visible in every walk of life. Our differences will create new experiences for those with whom we have to integrate. I know that on a number of occasions my passionate expressions and emotive contributions have not been comfortably received. On some occasions I have tried to change my approach in public discussions, as English people are known for their cold, rational and distant approach to debates.

Language has huge cultural components attached to it. The way we speak and organise our thoughts has a huge effect on our emotions and behaviour. While operating within a dominant culture there is a great pressure on us to adapt to the measures acceptable to the majority culture, which can be limiting and at times very frustrating.

Healthy integration means that everyone has been given a fair and equal chance to fulfil his or her roles and to take part in social and interactive experiences. In practice this means that as parents we need to get involved with our children's schools, as tenants to take part in our neighbourhood schemes, and as ordinary citizens to participate in local issues. Our presence will allow those who are unfamiliar with difference to begin to realise that they also have a role to play and that is to acknowledge and accommodate these differences and question some of the deep-rooted prejudices hidden in all of us.

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