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# Introduction

Today, refugees and internally displaced people constitute a large but forgotten population. By the end of 2013, the number of refugees worldwide was estimated to be 16.7 million, an increase in 1.2 million refugees since the end of 2012. Estimates by UNHCR (2013a) put the number of refugees in the UK at 149,330, approximately 0.23% of the total population (63.7 million).

Displaced people, no matter what the cause of their displacement, confront health and social challenges that others never experience. Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) play an essential role in serving, involving, uniting and advocating on behalf of their refugee communities. Nevertheless, RCOs have to operate in an increasingly challenging environment with limited support and access to resources. Moreover, rising anti-sentiment among the public coupled with the negative portrayal of refugees by the media, will pose serious challenges for refugee communities and the organisations that strive to protect them.

Given the urgency of these challenges, the London Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) believes that it can play an active role in supporting RCOs, which in turn will support their refugee communities as well as the wider communities in which these RCOs operate.

Initially, in order to better understand ways the LRCE could support RCOs, desk research was conducted and a cross section of journals and publications were assessed in order to identify related themes in the literature. The themes that were extracted are outlined in this report. This report will set out to expand on these ideas with a perspective on ESD, identifying learning opportunities for RCOs and their respective communities. Finally, by carrying out this initiative, the LRCE hopes to create a new learning space in which RCOs can come together, learn from one another, share expertise as well as promote best practice.

# 2.0 Integration

The resettlement of refugees offers an opportunity to rebuild their lives. However resettlement does not simply involve the relocation of refugees to another country, but rather their integration into a new society in order to empower them to begin a new life with dignity and respect.

The UNHCR (2013b) identifies integration as a dynamic two-way process that places demands on

both the refugee and the receiving community and goes beyond ensuring that they are provided with basic needs and access to services. Bearing this in mind, governments and civil society should be responsible for creating a welcoming environment which supports refugees to achieve long-term economic stability and adjust to the new society, including fostering a sense of belonging, and encouraging participation in their new communities.

As the numbers of those seeking asylum in the UK have increased so has the level of interest in integration policy. In March 2005, the UK Home Office published *Integration Matters*, which sets out to offer a national strategy for refugee integration. The UK Government defines integration as ‘the process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British Society, to contribute to the community, and to become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities that they share with other residents’ (Home Office, 2005). The Home Office commissioned Ager and Strang (2004) to develop the ‘Indicators of Integration’ framework, which set out to offer insight into the factors that constitute successful integration. As shown in the figure below, this framework consists of ten indicators organised into four distinct domains. Although this framework displays 10 distinct indicators, it is important to take into account that these factors are interdependent (Ager and Strang, 2008). Three of these indicators will be explored in this report; these include education, employment and social connections.

Source: Ager and Strang (2004)

## 2.1 Education and Lifelong Learning

Refugees and asylum seekers are not a homogenous group and their individual circumstances and motivations to learn will vary greatly. These include: asylum seekers who wish to progress to university; unaccompanied children whose age has been disputed by the Home Office not being able to access schools, so further education colleges are their main sources of formal education; people arriving in the UK as adults requiring English language classes; professionals wishing to attend vocational refresher courses experiencing gaps in their working careers due to forced migration; and people wishing to engage in community learning to meet new friends and start to integrate (Refugee Council, 2013).

Therefore, refugees’ access to learning is a crucial element in the integration process. In support of this, the UK Government developed a policy response towards lifelong learning opportunities for refugees in an attempt to tackle social exclusion. The current policy focus is on formal, accredited education (Morrice, 2007).

Post-16 education is particularly important in providing refugees with opportunities to learn English, develop or update vocational skills or take steps towards access to higher education. Improving their English language skills is an essential step to facilitating access to services, social and political participation and the building of wider community links. Also, enabling refugees to gain qualifications leads to greater employment options and possibilities for integration (Refugee Council, 2013). Yet, there are a range of barriers preventing refugees and asylum seekers from accessing education, especially higher education, some of which include language barriers, cost, lack of understanding about options, ineligibility and bureaucracy (WMCARS, 2006).

The government’s policy response towards education and lifelong learning opportunities highlights the importance of education in the integration process; however, its focus on formal education undermines the significance of learning in informal and non-formal contexts. More importantly, it is based on a one-size fits all model, with a narrow and prescriptive curriculum which fails to take into consideration the skills and qualifications gained throughout the refugees’ lives before seeking asylum in the UK (Morrice, 2007). Therefore, this indicates that there is ample scope to incorporate and promote lifelong learning opportunities for refugees through informal and non-formal learning (Discussed further in next sections).

Opportunities:

* Offer informal and non-formal learning opportunities
* Establish links with education institutions to overcome barriers to education

## 2.2 Employment and Lifelong Learning

Employment is another important element in the integration process. Employment enables interaction with hosts, increases opportunities for learning English, the opportunity to build a future and to regain confidence and esteem whilst economic independence makes adjustment to society easier. However, despite all this, refugees are six times more likely to be unemployed than non-refugees (NIACE, 2009). Also in comparison to other minority ethnic groups, refugees had lower levels of employment (29%) than minority ethnic groups (65%). What’s more is that the greater majority of refugees that are employed, are generally found to be working in sectors with low-pay, low-skill and poor employment prospects. This delay in gaining access to training and employment opportunities brings about the deskilling of refugees, especially among professionals.

Refugees are faced with a range of barriers that prevent them from entering the labour market, or forcing them to settle with these unskilled and low-paid jobs. Current policies fail to take into account the qualifications and experiences that most of the refugees have when they arrive. Employers are also increasingly reluctant to hire refugees due to a lack of understanding about refugees’ rights to work and the risk of being fined for hiring without correct documentation. Moreover, the introduction of the five-year rule in 2005 has removed the long-term security of refugees, which may prevent personal investment in education and training in the UK (NIACE, 2009). In terms of entrepreneurship, business support services to refugees are often, buried within services to ethnic minorities who are better established in the UK and, at times, there is none or very little recognition at all of the need for specialised services to refugees (WMCARS, 2006).

Therefore it is essential that methods are developed that will enable managers and practitioners in mainstream employment to recognise and audit the skills and qualifications that migrants have acquired prior to their arrival in the UK, so that such services can support the social and vocational integration of migrants. Also, promoting informal and non-formal learning opportunities in a work based setting will prove to be an important first step towards improving access to employment as it will help develop essential skills such as communication and time management. An example of such an approach may include work based mentoring and shadowing opportunities.

Opportunities:

* Match skills to business needs
* Accrediting skills/ qualifications
* Self-employment/ enterprise development
* Cross-sector partnership between businesses and RCOs to support work placements

## 2.3 Social Capital and Lifelong Learning

Morrice (2007) argues that for refugees to become integrated, effective and competent members of UK society, the process of assimilating into social networks, developing cultural understanding and knowing the rules of social engagement is essential. This understanding of social norms and tacit knowledge is most often gained through informal and non-formal learning opportunities.

Social capital is one framework that offers insight into the less tangible barriers which refugees can face. According to Morrice (2007) social capital can be viewed as a resource or ‘capital’ which can be drawn upon in order to achieve goals. In this view, a person’s social capital can provide them with networks of advantage linking in to skills, ideas and knowledge which can then be used to their own advantage.

However, Field (2005) makes a clear distinction between different forms of social capital and suggests that some forms can be more beneficial to learning than others. A brief differentiation is provided in the table below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ‘Bonding’ Social Capital | ‘Bridging’ Social Capital |
| Made up of strong ties to people who are similar (demographic, ethnic) | Made up of ties made between more distant groups or social classes |
| Exclusive | Broader Identities |
| Homogenous | Heterogeneous |
| Helps in ‘Getting by’ | Helps in ‘Getting ahead’ |
| Limits access to new ideas, skills and information | Gaining access to new ideas, skills and information |

Refugee communities usually have less ‘bridged’ social capital, and instead have more ‘bonded’ social capital. Usually these social networks are small, consisting of family members and friends. Consequently, due to the nature of their restricted networks, they will have less access to informal learning opportunities. This is a significant disadvantage owing to the fact that it is through these informal learning opportunities that refugees pick up tacit knowledge and information about the norms and expectations associated with particular systems, which is crucial if refugees wish to engage with the education system or enter the labour market (Morrice, 2007). Additionally, it will be very difficult for them to grasp the codes and etiquette of social society, which Field (2005) suggests will eventually lead to them ‘developing strategies leading to withdrawal and avoidance’.

This demonstrates that mixing and socialising with local communities is an important element in the social integration of refugees. A growing body of research suggests that this can be a potent catalyst for change and personal development; as such processes would support intercommunity connections, hence improved community cohesion. Also, they would help to tackle the negative perceptions towards refugees and their sense of isolation. Phillimore (2013) also maintains the importance of social capital in employment. In her study, she found that refugees without social networks fare worst in accessing employment.

Opportunities:

* Hosting Community Events in partnership with other local organisations
* Different forms of activities such as demonstrations, group activities, visits

#  Capacity Development of RCOs

Refugee Community Organisations have clearly been charged with the role of supporting the integration of refugees. However, there is growing evidence the challenging environment RCOs operate in are compromising their ability to bring about transformational and strategic change. In order for RCOs to have a role in integration in its fuller sense, they need to have a transformational role as opposed to a survival function (Narayan et al., 2000). Accordingly, this section will set out to focus on the barriers as well as the opportunities RCOs and their workforce are faced with.

## 3.1 RCOs: Leading Transformational Change

RCOs often emerge because of the shortcomings in the migration process itself and as such they serve to satisfy unmet needs, such as welfare, leisure and social interaction (Moya, 2005). Whatever the reason for RCO development, their role in contributing to refugee settlement is well established. Despite the acknowledged role that RCOs play in refugee integration, very little has been done by Government to support them, as they rely on competitive funds, seed-corn funding via the Refugee Community Development Fund and on charities and trusts (Phillimore and Goodson, 2010).

A lack of new public funding and dependence on small scale and short-term funding leaves RCOs doubly disadvantaged. In addition to lacking the ability to attract sustainable funding, RCOs often have to compete for funding with more established NGOs. They also demonstrate a limited understanding of the British system and are dependent on small number of dedicated volunteers. Also, the sector is fragmented, with very little evidence that RCOs have undertaken any effective networking or information sharing (Zetter and Pearl, 2000). Phillimore and Goodson (2005) identified other institutional barriers that prevent the transformational role of RCOs. These include:

* Lack of understanding of UK systems
* Difficulty to grasp concept of partnership
* Mistrust and suspicion of other institutions

Consequently, RCOs are deterred away from having any policy or strategic influence as their efforts are directed towards meeting the survival needs of their community members. There is evidence that the reduction of advocacy and only providing direct services restrict their critical political role (Alcock and Craig, 2009).

In order to ensure refugees’ welfare needs can be met, resources need to be invested in building the capacity of RCOs to work together around key issues and engage with the public and wider voluntary sector.

Opportunities:

* Partnership development
* Developing policy strategy
* Capacity Development

## 3.2 Supporting Agents of Change

Front line social work in non-government organisations (NGOs) providing services for refugees and asylum seekers is demanding and challenging. In most NGOs in the UK, there is no supervision or structural support for front line social workers (Robinson, 2013b).

Funding is very limited in the voluntary sector. This is problematic as social workers are forced to meet service users’ needs but are required to do so with increasingly limited resources. This in turn is found to impact their health and well-being (Anheier, 2005). Also, the process of managerialism has given rise to the regulation of social worker’s work and monitoring of their activites. Similarly, the beaurocritasition of their work has given rise to increased paperwork which has cut down their ‘contact time’ with service users (Robinson, 2013a). Lastly, social workers may become overwhelmed by the horror of what they are hearing and experience similar trauma symptoms (Figley, 2002).

This illustrates the need for the incorporation of protective factors that serve the interest of the front-line staff in order to ensure their longevity and well-being. Robinson (2013a) recommends that increasing worker autonomy and developing a learning culture should be incorporated into social work training and development. Also, social workers must be well equipped with the skill set and resilience to work effectively in order to protect the human rights of service users. It is recommended that improved training and higher education be provided for social workers in health and social care services in order to prepare them for working with asylum seekers and refugees. Finally, in another study Robinson (2013b) maintains the importance of supervision in supporting staff achievement and retention.

Opportunities:

* Identifying protective factors that can be incorporated for social workers’ well-being and supervision
* Links with higher education institutions
* Skills audit

# 4.0 Conclusion

Evidently, it is clear that RCOs are faced with a myriad of challenges that prevent them from bringing about the transformational change that they strive to bring about. The LRCE firmly believes that by working in partnership with RCOs, it can help offer a platform that will empower RCOs to come together and unite themselves to tackle these challenges, which is necessary if they are to bring about sustainable, long-term change and have a positive impact on the communities that they support as well as the wider communities in which these RCOs operate.

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