

Migrant Communities and the 'Big Society'

Struggling to Belong in the Age of Austerity



Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The pace of change in our communities, coupled with the uncertainty brought about by austerity measures, is more than most of us can make sense of, or cope with. We must remind ourselves that fairness and justice are the core values of our society, and that they are all the more important to preserve during hard times.

You have probably heard about the concept of 'Big Society' many times by now, given the Government's vocal support for the policy over the past year. You may have also witnessed the equally vocal backlash against the idea, which is a direct result of the difference between the Government's rhetoric and the reality of public cuts, as shown by the reaction of community organisations in Liverpool and in Hammersmith and Fulham.

The recent BBC Four documentary series entitled 'Justice' eloquently outlined the debate on justice, fairness and the 'Big Society', and offered a crucial insight into what the public really thinks about the concept as proposed by the current government. When polled by philosopher Michael Sandel during the live studio debate, more than two thirds of the audience turned out to be skeptical about the concept. They believed in community and voluntary work as the key to improving our communities and contributing to a good society, but they did not have as much faith in the 'Big Society' as proposed by the government.

At the Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum (MRCF), we work with many different community and civil society organisations, and we have been wondering: "Why all this fuss about the Big Society?" Community and charity organisations across the country have been doing it for years. *We are the Big Society*. We welcome the promotion of Big Society, as well as a debate about how to do it better, but the timing of Big Society speak in the context of a massive withdrawal of resources has the potential to backfire completely.

In order to have a principled discussion on the issue of a better society, the key question to ask is not how to do it for free, but how to do it fairly, so that the hard won accomplishments that have made our communities better and more self-reliant are not swept away by austerity measures. A commitment to fairness with a corresponding investment in a just society will also bring about savings in the long term.

The harsh reality of public sector cuts is already creating tensions where there should be harmony. For example, is it fair to displace dozens of community organisations from Hammersmith and Fulham's Pallinwick House only to sell the community building to a new Big Society-style school championed and run by what appear to be privileged parents? Is the Big Society meant for all, or only for some?

The Big Society, or better yet the Good Society, is viable only if it strives towards equality and fairness, and is based on cooperation rather than the free market idea of competition. The Big, Good, Fair, Just, Happy Society is not about charity; it is about justice! If you are not sure where you stand in this equation, ask yourself if you would rather be on the receiving end of someone's charity or a part of the solution as someone who is recognised and respected for the efforts you make together with your fellow citizens.

The better society needs to reflect achievements and a knowledge of human development. As our world is made up of collaborative communities, and diverse individuals within these, our society must value cooperation over competition. Most importantly for us at MRCF, it needs to be an inclusive society, where new and existing citizens can have a voice and are respectfully accepted and valued for their contribution.



Justice for Domestic Workers

At MRCF, we know a thing or two about justice and fairness, as many of our members have experienced persecution in their countries of origin when opposing oppression and continue to struggle with access to justice in the UK. Many of them succeed despite the odds. They tell us that their success is due to their connectedness to others who support them: (extra)ordinary citizens, British and migrant alike, who believe in mutualism and the common good as the foundation of a good society and who are organising on issues that are important to all our communities. Similarly, our success as a society during these hard times depends on how well we relate to each other and everything around us.

We offer you this short paper as a reminder of how migrant and refugee communities contribute to and help build a better society.

In order to acknowledge and build on Britain's investment in the meaningful integration of migrants over the last two decades, we ask that:

- 1. The contribution of migrant and refugee community organisations to the Big Society is taken into account, acknowledged and preserved.**
- 2. We, migrants and refugees, are included in the conversation about building a better and bigger society.**
- 3. British society, regardless of its size and political agenda, remains underpinned by principles of equality and fairness for all its citizens.**
- 4. The pace of change slows down enough to ensure that we don't lose the progress made thus far, remembering that there is no quick fix to inclusion and integration, particularly of marginalised and vulnerable communities.**

And, in the spirit of a *better* and *bigger* society, this report was written in collaboration by the Migrants' Rights Network and MRCF, with participation from the Chinese National Healthy Living Centre, the Midaye Somali Development Network, the West and North West London Vietnamese Association, the Shpresa Programme for Albanian Speaking Community and the Zimbabwean Women's Network in the UK.

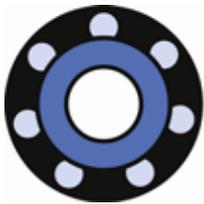
Methodology

This report forms part of MRCF's 'Engage to Change' project, which aims to bring out the experiences, perspectives and concerns of migrants and refugees in London in order to develop their capacity to inform public debate and contribute to change.

This report draws upon and complements a number of recent studies on the impact of the recent economic recession on migrant groups coupled with the first round of funding cuts to Migrant and Refugee Community Organisations (MRCOs) in London, including research by the Migrant Organisations Development Agency and Middlesex University, the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and the Greater London Authority, and numerous others.

The case studies feature five MRCOs and are based on interviews with their leaders, staff and volunteers held towards the end of 2010. All quotes in the report are taken from the interviews, unless specified otherwise. In addition, MRCF consulted the organisations' published annual reports, websites and other material describing their work and financial standing.

About the Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum (MRCF)



MRCF
Migrant and Refugee
Communities Forum

MRCF is a user-led community empowerment alliance of 40 organisations, with 17 years of experience in supporting refugee and migrant communities. Our work practically addresses the social exclusion of migrant and refugee residents and strengthens their voice and civic participation, with the overall aim of achieving equality for disadvantaged individuals and communities.

We assist refugee and migrant community organisations on a daily basis in their efforts to empower and integrate their communities. Our support for community organisations and projects is tailored according to the needs and capacity of each group. It is holistic and guided by our belief in self-advocacy and includes help with governance, project development and fundraising, partnership brokerage and strategic planning. We support communities to serve their members and to engage with the complex world of funders, local authorities and policy makers and the mainstream voluntary sector.

Our Engage to Change initiative, of which this report is a part, provides our member organisations (migrant and refugee community organisations MRCOs), individuals, partners and staff with opportunities to engage with policy makers. This is mainly achieved through public meetings with high profile speakers on relevant topics and the production of reports, briefings and consultation responses that give voice to their concerns.



Engage to Change is funded by London Councils.

About the Migrants' Rights Network



The Migrants' Rights Network (MRN) was established in December 2006. MRN works to support migrant community organisations and organisations working with migrants on issues related to employment, community, access to public services, and other matters which have consequences for migrants' rights and social justice. MRN employs a

discussion framework, experience sharing, research promotion, policy analysis, as well as lobbying and campaigning. MRN works in partnership with MRCF to help add voices of migrants and refugees to policy debates.

The purpose of this report

Recession and the first round of cuts have already placed pressure on the voluntary sector, especially in relation to employment, welfare and housing issues.¹ More is to come: tougher immigration policies, changes to the welfare system and legal aid cuts are bound to create a greater demand for services provided by the voluntary and community sector.

Since the May elections, in our conversations about migrants and the Big Society with decision makers at all levels and from all political backgrounds, we have been concerned to discover that so many policy makers have an outdated or inaccurate understanding of what organised migrant and refugee communities do, why they had to be set up and what would happen if they did not exist.

We were told that the cuts would be distributed so as not to hurt the most vulnerable, but there is already evidence to show that this is not the case. MRCOs along with other minority groups are particularly vulnerable and there is no evidence that the Government understands the social impact of their work. Without careful consideration, further cuts may severely undermine the integration of these communities, costing British society much more in the long run.

The aim of this report is to present the case for, and explore the critical role of, MRCOs in providing social protection, accelerating integration and improving lives in London's diverse communities. In other words, we aim to show why MRCOs are a crucial part of the Big Society.

A better understanding of what MRCOs do, how they do it and the difficulties they encounter may help secure their funding and future, as well as a better provision of services in their communities. It will also help with integration, which will lead to a better use of resources and a more cohesive and equal society for all.

To get a clearer understanding of MRCOs role in society, three key issues need to be carefully considered:

- 1) Practical - Barriers to accessing mainstream services specific to migrant and refugee communities can only be overcome through partnering with MRCOs embedded in those communities. Given the anticipated impact of the first round of cuts, it is reasonable to expect a growing need that only MRCOs will be able to successfully address through their role as partners to statutory agencies, helping the most vulnerable to survive the austerity measures.
- 2) Ethical - Social cohesion and integration remain one of the government's priorities. The Big Society can form part of the solution for weathering the storm created by necessary funding cuts only if there is a safety net provided by the goodwill, skill and dedication of our communities. This task will be all the more difficult without MRCOs to work as points of access and sources of intelligence and specialist knowledge to facilitate, influence and ease this change.
- 3) Strategic – In order to carry out this mission, MRCOs are heavily reliant on external funding, both from statutory and independent sources. These funders and commissioners have been under financial pressures for some time, first due to the recession in 2008 and now due to the first round of public service cuts. Any further cuts need to be thought out carefully so as not to lose MRCOs as partners in reaching out to the most vulnerable citizens. Their voices and experience must be considered in any future public policy discussion on how to deal with the fallout from the first round of cuts and welfare system reforms.

Why Do Migrant and Refugee



London is home to some 900,000 migrants and refugees. Over 40% of the UK's migrants live in the capital,² making it the UK city with the highest concentration of diverse communities, as well as one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world.³ Many of London's migrant communities are long-established, following patterns set by historical in-flows from European and Commonwealth countries.⁴

Last year, London came first in a survey which considered the capacity of cities around the world to attract and benefit from international populations. The British Council's OPENCities project compared 26 cities worldwide, looking at factors including diversity policies, quality of life and education. Professor Mike Hardy, the head of partnerships at the Council, said:

"Openness is a real advantage for cities if they are pursuing plans to be internationally connected and play international roles. While some of the factors influencing openness are beyond the direct control of cities, many of these factors are well within the control or immediate influence of city governments: the city's identity and character; its education, housing and cultural offer; the kind of local democracy it practices and the forms of participation it encourages."⁵

Since the late 1980s, London has seen a substantial diversification in the communities that have settled within the capital.⁶ During the late 1980s and 1990s, many people from conflict-ridden countries such as Zimbabwe, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq sought asylum

Chinese National Healthy Living Centre. Photo by CNHLC in the UK. The government policy of opening up London's labour markets to migrant workers during the 1990s led to the arrival of a more diverse spread of migrant workers, including from within East and South East Asia and South America. This trend continued with the accession of the ten new EU member states in 2004. Continued family reunification and wider settlement from these countries has led to the growth of London's newer and substantial, migrant communities.

New Arrivals Face New Challenges

The experiences of the capital's newer migrants are highly varied. This is often dependent upon a number of integration factors, including particular cultural needs within the community, English language skills, existence of social networks, and attitudes towards migration and employment opportunities within their local area. As immigration controls have toughened, the immigration status of London's migrants has also become increasingly significant in determining their rights and entitlements. This means that the experiences of highly skilled migrant workers or most European Union nationals are starkly different from those of other migrant workers, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in the capital.

Although many migrant communities in London have demonstrated an enviable capacity to adapt and integrate successfully into the city, a growing body of evidence indicates that other

Community Organisations Exist?

recent arrivals, particularly those with less advanced English language skills and educational qualifications or with substantial cultural differences to the majority population, have found it more difficult to orientate and settle in the UK. The difficulties they encounter are likely to include:

1) Insecure employment – London’s migrants are disproportionately represented among the low-skilled, low-paid workers who provide flexible labour for employment agencies in sectors such as cleaning, care work and hospitality. Their work is marked by insecurity due to temporary contracts, part-time jobs and non-recognition of migrant qualifications.⁷

2) Increased risk of some health problems – Migrant workers are believed to suffer twice the rate of workplace accidents and occupational diseases as the rest of the population.⁸ Some migrant communities experience particular physical and mental health problems; often there are cultural taboos associated with community-based problems, which can make them much harder to address. Refugee communities are also often dealing with the trauma caused by war and exile.

3) Risk of exploitation in the private housing sector – Many migrants are not entitled to social housing, leading to an increased dependence on the private housing sector and an accompanying exposure to overcrowding and inflated pricing. Recent research looking at Eastern European migrants in the UK found that 44% of migrants interviewed were sharing a room and a third of them had moved in the last eight months.⁹

4) Lack of awareness of rights in the UK – New arrivals are often unaware of the rights and entitlements that they may have in the UK, or of wider support networks that are available to help them. This can mean that they are more vulnerable to exploitation or discrimination.

5) Feelings of social exclusion or isolation – Many people arriving in London report experiencing wider social isolation, a lack of opportunities to meet local people, a lack of confidence and the expectation that they will encounter hostility from their local community.

Many of these difficulties are coupled with a lack of access to mainstream public support, including public services and the welfare state. When accessing healthcare, social services and public benefits, the problems are often reported to arise due to complicated and at times adversarial bureaucratic systems, and their confusion about migrants’ entitlements.

Other obstacles such as lack of language support and translation services further complicate the problems. Official equalities enquiries (in particular the Parekh report and the MacPherson enquiry) echo findings that, overall, British public services do not yet adequately meet the needs presented by the UK’s ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse communities.¹⁰

Austerity measures make improvements to equal access to services even less likely. The recent public sector cuts have further jeopardised the capacity of public service providers to meet the diverse needs of migrant communities in the UK. Local authority budgets for integration support to new arrivals are severely limited, as is the provision of interpreters for accessing service providers.

Combined with reduction of funding for free ESOL provision, this situation is likely to result in thousands of people not speaking any English, unable to participate in society and exposed to all kinds of exploitation.

Finally, the proposed legal aid cuts mean that accessing free specialist legal advice will become all but impossible to those without funds, confidence, knowledge and communal links to access and utilise possible alternatives such as pro bono legal advice or telephone helplines.¹¹

What Do Migrant and Refugee



Many of the problems outlined above are being addressed by MRCOs. London's estimated 335 MRCOs generally operate on the basis of self-help and are organised along the lines of identity traits, but also along common interests such as protecting the rights of domestic workers. Other MRCOs are aimed at specific sections of the community, such as women or elderly people.¹²

MRCOs are usually set up and led by knowledgeable and active community members within a local area, and are usually heavily dependent on volunteers while also collaborating with mainstream services. They often begin in someone's living room, as a way of helping people to

deal with everyday needs, functioning as a home away from home, particularly for communities exiled by war or political violence. Many go on to obtain charitable status, acquire resources and employ staff and engage volunteers. This report contains five case studies which aim to provide an insight into the work of MRCOs. This chapter provides a summary and an analysis of the main themes which these case studies reveal.

A few MRCOs (including MRCF) work across London and partner with other organisations to address problems that are common to many community organisations across the capital, such as advice, mental health, education and employability support. The idea is to pool resources and

Community Organisations Do?



Hodan Somali Community

efforts in order to address these issues, leading to cost savings and efficiency in the long run. Another idea is to utilise the more capable members of communities as cultural brokers to improve access, opportunities, quality of life and the quality of society overall.

MRCOs are caught on the one hand between the demands posed by their users and their role as civil society self-help groups, and on the other hand trying to meet some of those needs through resources commissioned by the public sector and thus acting within a more professionalised third sector framework delivering statutory targets.

This means that MRCOs frequently deliver 'two for the price of one' support, but have traditionally been in fire-fighting mode, too overstretched to find time and resources to do policy research and present these experiences in the form of hard hitting evidence that would affect wider change.

This kind of community work, which saves millions of pounds because it is preventative, is now highly jeopardised by the proposed cuts to local authorities, NHS and funding designed to address London-wide issues. Funding and service cuts to vulnerable communities and the impact these will have on equality are at present being tested in a number of Judicial Reviews (JRs). These JRs highlight the problems resulting from the rushed austerity measures. In the most recent judgment about proposed cuts to London Council's funding, a Judge ruled that London Councils' consultation process had failed to meet their statutory equality duties. He said that London Councils must re-run the process, this time with full equality impact assessments.¹³

The work of MRCOs is mainly concerned with practical assistance, but they are also well placed to amplify the voices of isolated and disadvantaged members of migrant communities and share their experiences with public agencies and the general public. Their work is generally focused on three objectives:

- 1) To meet the needs in their community which are left unmet by public services;
- 2) To build bridges with others in order to secure wider social cohesion and the integration of their communities; and
- 3) To give voice to their users' concern in order to inform the process of social change.

Meeting community needs left unmet by public services

MRCOs aim to fill gaps in mainstream public services that are not being filled by local authorities, such as new arrivals support (including orientation), access to public services (education, welfare, health and housing) and skills development. The need for this kind of support is in great demand and is expected to rise as government services are scaled back.¹⁴ The needs are simple but they require a multifaceted approach and complex solutions. A successful response requires in-depth knowledge and understanding of the community—its experiences, culture, needs and perceptions—as well as an understanding of how mainstream society operates. MRCOs are embedded in both worlds, resulting in creative, adaptable and innovative solutions:

“[Zimbabweans] can get clinical help but not help with social and economic issues...I don't think social services are in a position, when people first come in, to take up their issues immediately” (Trizah, Zimbabwe Women's Network UK)

MRCOs often work in partnership with mainstream voluntary sector organisations, such as Age Concern. By collaborating with organisations offering basic skills training, legal advice and mental health support, MRCOs can ensure that the needs of their communities are recognised and addressed. This means that the expertise of the specialised voluntary sector organisation is combined with the community links and expertise of the MRCOs. These partnerships deliver well designed and cost effective services, but require resources to set up and maintain.

Providing information on the rights and responsibilities in culturally appropriate way helps to overcome the isolation and disorientation experienced by many migrants. This initial response by MRCOs often extends to wider orientation services that are not provided by local authorities, such as signposting, information on job opportunities and access to education. Some MRCOs educate their community members about law, customs and citizens' responsibilities, while others offer drop-in health centres, advice clinics and supplementary homework classes for children.

“Without the support we give to vulnerable members of the Chinese community, people can spiral down and never come back”. (Eddie, Chinese Healthy Living Centre)

Often, MRCOs operate as a port of last resort for people who are depressed, destitute or ill—one step away from complete isolation.

“If someone comes in here and talks to us, they go away thinking it's not the end of the world, life can still go on.” (Trizah, Zimbabwean Women's Association)

Finally, commonly provided services also focus on skills-development not addressed by the statutory sector and voluntary organisations. These are often aimed at more vulnerable members of the community (e.g. women, teenagers and the elderly) and range from language services and translation, to specific skills tutorship leading to vocational and professional qualifications or volunteering positions. The heavy reliance of most MRCOs on volunteers means that they often inadvertently provide ad hoc training and volunteering opportunities for members of their community.¹⁵

“Shpresa became my window of knowledge, my hope and inspiration. [Volunteering for] Shpresa was my launch-pad into employment.” (Besa, volunteer for Shpresa project)

Building bridges to improve social cohesion and integration

The work of MRCOs results in more independent individuals who can take part in society on an equal footing with other citizens. That participation leads to better community cohesion and social integration which not only benefits their own interests but society as a whole. The term integration is often taken by policy makers to mean efforts to be made by immigrants to fit into mainstream society, whereas the approach taken by many MRCOs is of a two-way integration process whereby migrants and refugees play an active and equal role in society, feel that they belong and are supported and respected for their contributions.¹⁶





“The question to ask about integration is: ‘When do we stop being immigrants and become citizens?’ It has been our experience that from the moment you start caring for your neighbourhood, your community, for your city, and start working to make it better, you are integrated.”¹⁷ (Zrinka, MRCF)

Through addressing immediate needs and helping community members navigate various challenges, MRCOs help build their confidence and skills to break out of isolation, take part in wider community initiatives and advocate their own interests within a wider social agenda. Community work brings people together, generating a sense of solidarity and obligation to others, thereby generating cohesiveness that is critical to developing a sense of belonging. Communities with strong internal ‘bonds’ are more likely and more able to link to other communities, and the wider society.¹⁸

“We want [Albanians in London] to feel more confident, to vote, to take care of their environment, to be less isolated and to be happy.” (Luljeta, Shpresa)

MRCOs Give Voice to New Citizens

MRCOs actively voice the interests and rights of their members pressing for statutory responses that adhere to equality and human rights. In the process of helping statutory service providers make their services accessible to minorities, MRCOs actually perform a civil society role, as their interventions improve the performance of government departments and therefore contribute to a fairer and more efficient society. While the Equality and Human Rights Commission watches over our national human rights framework, MRCOs bring equality to individuals in a practical way.

There is an important point to be made here about the legitimacy of MRCOs. This comes from their knowledge and expertise based on links to their community. MRCOs are truly grassroots organisations, with unique insights, knowledge and perspectives that should be considered when designing public policies.

This legitimacy is sometimes confused with representation in a political sense, so that MRCOs are often dragged into consultations to speak on

behalf of entire ethnic groups and to satisfy ‘tick the box’ approaches to equalities obligations. Since MRCOs are not representative in the traditional political sense, when they engage in such exercises without proper facilitation, it can result in gatekeeping and community divisions.

But where MRCOs are asked to cooperate with different levels of government, other NGOs and civil society groups on the basis of their understanding of the relevant issues, they are uniquely placed to contribute to public dialogue on issues of social policy. And in this way they offer a pathway to institutions, services and a means of civic participation for migrants:

“[Our work has] provided a venue for and encouraged community participation... as one way of teaching democratic and citizenship values to Vietnamese migrants [and] battling their isolation”. (Long Lam, Vietnamese Association)

“We are committed to assisting African women and their children attain their full potential in their new British culture by helping them with the transition process from their African past to their British present and future.” – (Trizah, ZIWNUK)

MRCOs have a role to play in deliberative democracy and participatory government because they provide a conduit through which immigrants can challenge barriers and build links with receiving communities by helping plan policies and services.¹⁹ London government has a history of initiatives in partnership with MRCOs, such as the Greater London Authority (GLA) Refugee Implementation Strategy where MRCOs were both consultants and delivery partners.

However, the ability and confidence of new communities in the UK to play an effective role in the local governance processes is influenced by many factors including how the government chooses to act on its equality obligations, national policies related to diversity and community cohesion, the approach of local decision-makers and statutory bodies, as well as their own internal community dynamics, skills and resources. This process only produces results when those in power take responsibility by including new citizens and MRCOs, recognising the value of their contribution.

Weathering the Storm:

Past and Future Challenges for MRCOs

The quality and significance of the work of MRCOs does not correspond to the financial support they receive: 63% of refugee community organisations surveyed in 2007 had an annual income of less than £50,000,²⁰ of which a large proportion came from external resources, namely local authorities and charitable trusts, while only a minimum proportion of their income was funded by membership fees, donations or fundraising activities.²¹ Securing adequate financial resources to support their work is a substantial challenge. The extent of the reduction in funding for MRCOs in London in 2008 and 2009 has not yet been compiled centrally, but anecdotal evidence as well as evidence drawn from the voluntary sector as a whole is extremely troubling.

The pressure on MRCO budgets has been steadily increasing over the past decade. The Charity Market Monitor 2009 reported that 41% of the top 300 charitable trusts found their grant-making value fell in 2008 during the recession. There was a drop of net asset value among the top trusts of 10%, impacting on their grant-making capacity.²² In March 2009, the Charity Commission reported that over a half of charities had been impacted by the downturn, with 58% of these charities directly experiencing a reduced income.²³

In addition to the availability of funds, the structure of funding also poses a challenge. The shift in policy from grant funding towards service commissioning, or 'contract funding' has reduced the possibility of securing funding for the costs of overheads—so called core costs.

Rather than responding to community needs, many community groups have had to develop new services to meet funder priorities, mainly short-term activity-led projects with no strategic planning. These projects can be demanding in terms of delivery and reporting, making it more difficult for community organisations to recover core costs, develop internal reserves and increase their long-term stability. It is increasingly hard for MRCOs to raise funds to employ administrators and/or coordinators, yet like any charitable

organisation they are required to comply with relevant laws and to demonstrate quality and high levels of financial and overall accountability.

"If the government is serious about the "big society" philosophy, it is important that they create stability for these types of organisations so that we can pay our core and fixed costs." (Eddie Chan, Chinese Healthy Living Centre)

The changing policy approach towards migrant and refugee communities over the past decade has also made it increasingly difficult for the community-specific work done by many MRCOs to secure funding.

The role of MRCOs in supporting long-term integration has long been recognised by policy makers. "Integration Matters", the Home Office's 2004 strategy paper, cites the "enormously valuable work of Refugee Communities Organisations, which build links between refugees and the wider community".²⁴ The Department of Communities and Local Government acknowledges that community development and participation are "crucial not only to refugee integration, but to the improvement of community and civic life, political engagement and community cohesion".²⁵ And the London Government Authority is committed to supporting migrant integration in the city.²⁶

However, the national funding priorities filtering down to local authority agendas have increasingly favoured larger voluntary organisations and activities seen to be supporting wider 'community cohesion' and integration, and not community organisations.²⁷

The Coalition government shows signs of recognising this problem in its green paper 'Modernising Commissioning', which proposes new ways of boosting the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives in public service delivery.²⁸ But the real question is whether these new ideas genuinely allow for the involvement of community organisations.

Despite all these commitments to MRCOs, there remains a real ambivalence among some policy-makers and funders regarding the way that MRCOs should be developing their work in order to boost the integration of London's migrant communities. MRCOs are increasingly assessed on their compatibility with a mainstreaming agenda and in particular on whether active measures are being taken to reach out beyond immediate communities in order to engage with wider society.²⁹ A frequently asked question is: Are 'single issue' or 'single ethnicity' community groups contributing towards a 'ghettoisation' of migrants and refugees thereby leading to more isolation and social divisions? Such considerations have shaped the funding of MRCOs and continue to be coupled with other efficiency criteria, such as prospects for merging with similar organisations in order to deliver better value for money and demonstrate a willingness to extend work beyond a core constituency.

Whilst helping MRCOs to link their communities with the mainstream is undoubtedly to be supported, it must be recognised that this work will require more and not fewer resources for it to be effective.

If MRCOs are to survive in the new funding and policy environment they will have to make their already scarce resources stretch even further. Under the pressure of external changes many MRCOs have already had to adjust their fundraising, their choice of activities and the way they prove the value of their work, as well as invest time in developing partnerships and merging with other organisations in order to attract available funding.

MRCOs will find it difficult to address any further pressures in relation to resources and increases in workload they are under-staffed and preoccupied with the immediate delivery of services or activities, which leaves little time for developing internal sustainability.³⁰ MRCOs also may not have the necessary staff skills to navigate the fast changing funding and policy environment.

Many MRCOs already report an increasing difficulty with completing funding applications, often online, and satisfying administrative and structural requirements of funders especially

when commissioned contracts are involved. Despite attempts to address these issues via ongoing capacity-building work by infrastructure organisations, many MRCOs are likely to find themselves without the skills to meet funder demands in the current climate or compete with other, more competitive voluntary sector or even commercial providers.

The most effective MRCOs have a deep-rooted connection to and the trust of their community, are able to develop wider partnerships within the voluntary sector and with statutory bodies, and understand how best they can add value, in particular whether a specific situation calls for developing a new service or influencing an existing one so that it better meets the needs of their community.

Their work is also underpinned by professionalism, including democratic governance and transparent finances. Their capacity and community building activity is also greatly enhanced by volunteers who themselves gain skills and integrate more fully through their volunteering. It is these MRCOs who are most likely to be able to survive the austerity measures as they will be able to demonstrate good value for money in their delivery, submit good quality applications showing sound financial management, and engage in rigorous monitoring and evaluation of their projects in order to demonstrate positive impact. They are also most likely to have the skills and resources needed to achieve merges or partnerships with other organisations if adequate support and processes are in place.

However, although more efficiency can be gained with restructuring and collaborative work, these changes will not fully solve funding needs. The austerity measures are likely to wipe out many MRCOs leaving their communities without an important integration vehicle, and leaving the most vulnerable and isolated people unable to benefit from the statutory services they are entitled to.

What Needs To Be Done Now?

The 'Big Society' policy provides scope for MRCOs to be re-evaluated as an integral aspect of a rich and diverse national community. Now more than ever, MRCOs serve as a crucial safety net for the most vulnerable in our society.

We therefore ask that the following is taken into consideration in future policy dialogue concerning the Big Society.

1. The work of MRCOs cannot be replaced by statutory service providers

MRCOs provide services which public authorities, particularly those under financial pressure, will not be able to provide. Their links to and understanding of the communities they serve makes them irreplaceable. Their work cannot be delivered by mainstream organisations without substantial training and resourcing.

The long-standing development and value of this work will be lost with their closure. In cases where closures do happen, due consideration is required in order to make adequate transitions so as not to leave communities without support. A commitment to dialogue on future steps is necessary and it must involve partners from these communities to agree to concrete measures to replace their services by other providers.



2. The need for MRCOs is likely to increase over the coming period

Migrants and refugees who use the services of MRCOs are vulnerable and socially excluded members of our society. Cuts to public funding and changes in the welfare state are likely to increase their vulnerability. The needs of community members in relation to employment, housing, benefits, legal aid, and so on, is likely to increase rather than decrease in the context of greater financial pressures.

It is likely that mainstream agencies will have fewer resources to accommodate people with different cultural or linguistic needs. It is also likely that developments within immigration policy will also play a role in increasing the vulnerability of these communities. The vortex of measures negatively influencing refugee and migrant communities will render MRCOs all the more important in preventing destitution and other social and economic problems which can impact on society in general.

We ask for government departments on every level to consider the savings that will be made through small investments into MRCOs' preventative work.

3. Supporting MRCOs is an investment in cohesive and fairer society

The process of integration is an investment in the future of a stable and fair society. By providing new citizens with knowledge and skills to become self-sufficient members of society, MRCOs are a conduit for the greater integration and public engagement of migrants and refugees in British life.

MRCF Annual General Meeting 2010



Equality and Integration in Action



Photo by Shpresa

Five Communities Doing the Big Society

The following case studies describe the work of five very different migrant and refugee community organisations currently operating in London:

- The West and North West London Vietnamese Association
- The Chinese National Healthy Living Centre
- The Zimbabwe Women's Network in Isleworth
- Shpresa Programme for Albanian Speaking Community
- Midaye Somali Development Network

These organisations have substantial differences: some are well established, others have been more recently established; some are gender-focused, others organised around people from a particular country of origin. Their size and reliance on public funding also varies greatly. However, all are examples of the range of creative and committed work being undertaken across London in order to address the pressing—and otherwise unmet—needs of migrants and refugees.

Despite limited funding and a host of other challenges, these organisations provide high quality services and foster a culture of mutual support and social entrepreneurship. Their services are heavily dependent on the skills and commitment of volunteers.

All are flexible organisations that have sought to respond creatively to the gaps and failings of the mainstream system often by working in partnership with the statutory and voluntary sector. They are constituted organisations, with democratic structures and transparent and well-managed finances.

They are organisations that play a crucial role in fostering the two-way integration process at the centre of wider social cohesion—facilitating a sense of belonging as well as participation and active citizenship. They demonstrate in practice how focused support for one community or interest group can be beneficial for the wider society.

West & North West London Vietnamese Association, Shepherd's Bush



Photo by WNWLVA

The West and North West London Vietnamese Association (WNWLVA) was set up to support newly arrived Vietnamese migrants in the late 1980s. At that stage it provided ESOL classes, signposting to services, job seeking assistance and supplementary schooling.

Twenty years later the organisation still exists and is responding to the changing needs of the community, chiefly that the older generation is growing old in exile. For the elderly, it provides socialising opportunities, such as accompanied shopping, house visits and befriending services, to prevent isolation. Other major issues facing the community are unemployment and under-employment, as well as family breakdown. The Association has previously provided intensive employment training but has had to substantially reduce its work on this issue since its funding from the Big Lottery ended.

The Association has also encouraged and provided a venue for community participation as a way of teaching democratic and citizenship values to Vietnamese migrants unused to living in a democratic society. It has offered volunteering opportunities which have often given the recipients the necessary work experience to secure paid employment. This activity has also had the added benefit of linking together different generations, as young members of the community volunteer to support the elderly.

The Association's funding situation has been precarious for some time and its work, which serves a core client base of over 200 people (120 of which are elderly), has always relied heavily on volunteers. At present it has 6 core volunteers who each contribute 2 to 3 hours a week. The minimal funding it received from a charitable trust in 2009/10 was just enough to cover the part-time salary of co-ordinator Long Lam, the only paid staff member, but that has since finished and the association now relies solely on volunteers.

The Vietnamese community has little business base to draw on for private fundraising and is entirely dependent on public and charitable trust funding which makes it particularly vulnerable to funding cuts. Funding from two local authorities has to date covered office rent, maintenance and basic running costs. However Hammersmith and Fulham, the Association's host local authority, has announced that for 2011/12 that it is cutting its funding by a third. Long has been told to expect further cuts in 2012/13 and in 2013/14. He has also been given notice that the building where they are based is likely to be sold off to raise capital. He is extremely worried that the Association will be forced to close.

The Chinese National Healthy Living Centre, Soho



Photo by CNHLC

Set up in 1987, the Chinese National Healthy Living Centre (CNHLC) was originally formed by a group of British-Chinese NHS doctors who were volunteering their time to run Sunday surgeries for the Chinese community. They wanted to address the health inequalities caused by the linguistic and cultural barriers which were preventing many Chinese migrants from accessing mainstream health services.

23 years on, the Centre has developed into the UK's only national Chinese voluntary organisation. It has established a reputation as an expert in Chinese health in the UK and has been visited by a number of Health Ministers and senior officials from the UK and abroad. The organisation is recognised as a key model for delivering health improvement to minority ethnic communities and has used its expertise to help many other communities to tackle health inequalities.

It has delivered some 40 projects and services to thousands of people—an estimated 10,000 in 2009 alone. For there is a real need: long restaurant working hours, poor English and community dispersion mean that many Chinese people face barriers to accessing mainstream health ser-

vices. The Centre's importance however is not only in guiding people towards these services but also in providing specialist medical attention at a bilingual doctor's surgery, including practical support in translating and interpreting. For example, a Hepatitis B clinic attends to the proportionally high numbers of Chinese people infected with this disease.

As the director Eddie Chan points out, these services which include free mental health and addiction counselling in Cantonese and Mandarin, respond to unmet needs in a way that is "lifesaving". The Centre also offers health education and information including outreach work in the regions, where many of the UK's highly dispersed Chinese population live. More recently, the centre has provided services for the health needs of irregular migrants who have no automatic right to access state healthcare.

Much of the Director's time is also spent working with the statutory sector and the mainstream voluntary sector to make their services more cost effective. For example he advised the NHS on Chinese language needs when they were setting up NHS Direct and Cancer Backup (now part of

Macmillan Cancer Support) on providing telephone support in Chinese. He also worked with the Health Protection Agency on the bird flu outbreak. The Centre has been recognised for its expertise through awards from the King's Fund, the London Development Agency and the Mayor of London. In addition, the centre provides health expertise to small Chinese community associations across the UK. In 2010, along with the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, it won the NHS London Region Health and Social Care Award for successful partnership working and was shortlisted for a National award.

CNHLC has an impressive range of funding. It has been particularly successful in raising money through selling services and social enterprise (a total of nearly £13,000 was raised this way in the financial year 2009/10). As well as demonstrating independence and self reliance, much of this work also benefits the wider UK population. Most significantly, CNHLC has run a programme, initially funded by the British Heart Foundation but more recently through commissioned contracts with local authorities, to help Chinese takeaways and restaurants cook healthier food. As Eddie says, "If we have to close down we won't be able to do things like this, the general public will miss out".

Like most MRCOs, CNHLC relies heavily on volunteers, many of whom are highly skilled medical professionals. It has an innovative approach to finding volunteers. For example, it recruits Chinese speaking students from London university medical schools to interpret for non Chinese speaking NHS staff when they are carrying out health checks at outreach events.

The public funding that the centre does receive, mainly from the Department of Health and Westminster PCT, goes directly to pay for fixed costs towards its central London location and some of the specialist medical staff. In Eddie's words "people don't mind doing some voluntary work, they feel like they are doing something useful to address the unfulfilled needs of the community, but if you exploit them the quality of the work will drop and they will say 'no more'".

Given that much of its current public funding goes directly to pay fixed costs, further cuts would put the Centre at real jeopardy. As Eddie points out, "we cannot survive without funding for management support". Previous cuts in 2005 led to the closure of centres in Birmingham and Manchester and the services are still missed today. "The community will feel totally let down if you fund something to help them, which they get used to, and then you pull it", explains Eddie.

As this report goes to print CNHLC is still waiting to hear about what public funding it will have for 2011/12. Westminster City Council who currently fund the centre have announced that all funding of over £5,000 to the voluntary sector will now be distributed through commissioned contracts but no details are available as yet. Similarly, Westminster PCT, another core funder of the centre, is yet to make a decision about what funding it will provide. As always, CNHLC is being as proactive as it can and has applied to the Government's Transition Fund and the Department of Health's Financial Assistance fund.



Photo by CNHLC

Zimbabwe Women's Network in the UK (ZIWN UK), Isleworth

"People imagine that you come to London because you know it, but you have no clue. You have no idea where to go if you are sick, it's like you're just dropped here... We are here to fill that gap... Back in Africa we don't have flyers and materials so you don't know where to go".

These are the words of Trizah, ZIWN UK co-ordinator, and they echo the raison d'être of most MRCOs—the need to provide a much-needed link between mainstream services and isolated communities who may not initially understand each other.

Originally set up in 2003 to address the rights and welfare of recently arrived Zimbabwean women and their children, today ZIWN UK provides emotional and practical support to refugees, asylum seekers, students and migrants from all over Africa and the Caribbean as they face the challenges of settlement and integration in Britain. ZIWN UK's organisational leaflet states:

"The philosophy of ZIWN UK is based on the belief that change comes from within. As African women we need to be educated about our rights, health issues, environment, the myths and realities of oppressive cultural practices... We are committed to assisting African women and their children attain their full potential in their new British culture by helping them with the transition process from their African past to their British present and future. We believe that this transition, will be even smoother and faster if the women receive support in all aspects that make them complete, and these include children, family and self reliance—major African values."

The communities that ZIWN UK serves have real needs that are unmet by mainstream services: many clients have suffered trauma as a result of persecution and war, some have also been the victims of rape, many others are HIV positive and once they arrive in the UK they face many barriers to access the support they need. These issues, if not addressed at the point of arrival, can lead to social and unemployment problems, as well as a sense of acute isolation.

"They give up on life, sit at home and wait to die...for example, a teacher who is out of work for 5 years maybe because of immigration status, or because of illness" explains Trizah.

Many women also arrive with their children and need help with the process of settling them into life in London. It is during these initial months where ZIWN UK

comes in, guiding new arrivals and informing them of their rights and responsibilities, reaching out to them in a moment when they may be isolated from their community and mainstream services.

"They need to find somebody with whom they can connect... somebody who looks like them" she adds.

The organisation offers advice to its 400 clients through one-to-one sessions and telephone support as well as group meetings to work on issues such as sexual health, domestic violence and other black women's issues: some 80% of HIV+ Zimbabweans in the UK are women. They have forged strong partnerships with other statutory and voluntary organisations to make sure that they are making the best use of available resources. ZIWN UK recognises that specialist services provided either by the public or voluntary sector are best placed to deal with clinical issues and that they should focus their work on social, emotional and economic problems.

ZIWN UK also delivers general advice on immigration, health, and housing and projects for families and young people. They are currently involved in a Big Lottery funded project with other local organisations which brings together families from a range of cultural backgrounds to share and learn about each others' cultures. In addition they are delivering a project called Choose a Future which is raising the confidence and self-esteem of girls and boys and helping them to make informed choices.

With an income for 2009/2010 standing at only £47,000 – mainly generated through statutory funding – ZIWN UK relies almost exclusively on regular volunteers who between them put in some 73 hours a week. The coordinator is a paid staff member for two days a week and her time is funded through the various projects the organisation runs. She works for the rest of the week and often at the weekend as a volunteer.

The organisation is growing and is in the process of acquiring charity status (it is currently a charitable company), but without its current funding, it would have to close, with significant implications for the wider community. As Trizah explains, ZIWN UK is unique for the cultural expertise it can offer. "We are the only ones in West London catering for this group of clients – women, children and young people."



**STRANGERS
CITIZENS**

call by the Citizen Organising Foundation
for a pathway to legal status for long-term migrants

STRANGERS INTO CITIZENS



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Shpresa Programme for Albanian Speaking Community, Plaistow



Photo by Shpresa

Many see social entrepreneurship as the way forward for MRCOs in tough economic times and the experience of Shpresa (which means 'Hope' in Albanian) is a good example of the possibilities it opens up. When Luljeta arrived in London in 1999 as an Albanian refugee she found it very hard to settle into life in East London without the language or much support. In particular, she experienced problems in finding out about local shops and services, including English language services—the general lack of orientation in the local area made it much harder to build a life here.

Once she finally was on her feet, she started providing services to other recent arrivals from Albania through a new project called Shpresa, which was initially located within the Refugee Renewal and Migrant Project (RAMP) in East London. She did a two-year training course with the School for Social Entrepreneurs to develop

the business plan for the charity, and its core mission. Today Shpresa is a registered charity with four full-time staff members, two part-time workers and 41 volunteers. Its core work is now with women and children in six London boroughs and includes a combination of practical advisory work to Albanian speaking refugees and migrants and campaign work—simultaneously focused on promoting integration and an understanding of the UK while encouraging pride in Albanian cultural identity.

Shpresa's projects include campaign and advocacy work, at times with organisations like Citizens UK, as well as its core services of much-needed advice and support in helping people find training, employment or volunteering, as a way of participating in society. Shpresa views active citizenship as crucial to facilitating social cohesion.

Shpresa is big on partnership work and always approaches partners with an attitude of 'how can we help you?' The organisation has been particularly successful in forming partnerships with local schools to incorporate Albanian language classes for Albanian children and Albanian identity clubs for all children, where they can learn about Albanian culture and about refugees. In this way Shpresa relays a message to schools, teachers and other children of cultural pride and anti-discrimination but also one of participation in local communities. The positive effects have been felt by many, as one teacher explained: "it has had a big impact on self-esteem and pride in cultural heritage. This year in Year 1 several friends of the Albanian pupils have asked to join the club."

In addition Shpresa runs a health and well being project for women in partnership with the Women's Therapy Centre. As they say on their website:

"Shpresa believes fervently in providing women with high quality support to enable them to build a new life in which they feel safe and able to contribute to their families and communities as full and active citizens... Tackling domestic violence and the long-term impact of exile has been challenging but Shpresa has developed a partnership with the Women's Therapy Centre enabling women to find a safe space to explore how they feel and what they want for themselves and their children. Shpresa has seen women grow and develop taking up employment and becoming community leaders as well as confident and skilled parents. We are also delighted that mainstream providers want to learn from us and develop culturally sensitive services for women from the Albanian speaking community."

A major reason for the organisation's success in helping to integrate Albanian refugees and migrants into UK life is their focus on volunteering projects for the Albanian-speaking community as a pathway into employment. This emphasis on volunteering (Shpresa has 41) fosters a sense of belonging and of real participation in British society.

Shpresa has a larger budget than many other MRCOs, with an income of some £227,000 in the year ending in 2009. Also, unlike many MRCOs, Shpresa receives very little public funding. However, in this climate of funding cuts, it too faces having to cut back on the services that are so valued by its client base, and by its partners in the wider community. As Luljeta explains, "our work is so unique that no one else could replace it... We have built a long-term trust relationship between our communities and others... we share our working model with other communities – because it works... However we have started to feel the pressure of the cuts, now the competition is very high. We have had more rejections than ever. When we have asked for feedback the answers were similar "we have had more funding applications than we anticipated and the board members had to make difficult decisions, those granted scored higher than you. I am not able to tell you what you can improve on."



Photo by Shpresa

Midaye Somali Development Network, Ladbroke Grove

When Waris Mohamoud arrived in London in 1990 from Somalia as a refugee and mother of five children under 12 years of age, she struggled to break past cultural and linguistic barriers to find support and access mainstream services. She persevered however, and would later use her hard-won experience to help other Somali mothers in London, offering advice from her living room from 2001. In 2002, Waris started Midaye Somali Development Network, in response to the needs of the local Somali community. Since then, the organisation has grown impressively. It still offers information, advice and advocacy to its largely refugee client base but also other services aimed at promoting integration, including a weekly supplementary school for 60 Somali children, study support groups, Adult English classes, a women's health project and elderly care. The kind of actions that Midaye's team take as part of their advice work include supporting parents to engage with schools about their child's education and intervening to sort out benefit and housing problems.

The most widespread community problems are those of isolation, destitution, long-term unemployment and family breakdown caused by the various strains of living in exile. Anti-social behaviour is also becoming a problem amongst the younger generation, and mentoring workshops are run informally to address this. Yet, this work too remains unfunded despite attempts to work in partnership with the borough police. Equally, the organisation has worked to raise awareness among the community of their rights and responsibilities within wider British society and the importance of participation, including citizenship training. In this way, Midaye acts as a bridge between the community, local authorities and mainstream society.



Photo by Midaye

Midaye's budget stood at £143,000 in 2009/2010, £20,000 of which came from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), its host local authority and £54,000 from the local NHS Trust to do health promotion work. And with this money they do a huge amount: they serve some 1,100 clients a year – some of whom cross the city to receive their services – and pay for seven part-time workers. Funding does not, however, cover all the costs of running the organisation – the rest of the work is undertaken by a committed team of seven volunteers who between them contribute 45 hours a week. Various projects have already had to be stopped prematurely such as a short educational film where children from the community acted out how to combat anti-social behaviour.

However, the organisation is resilient and has been creative in finding ways to supplement its small budget and extend services to people in need. It has partnered with other organisations including Open Age (a local voluntary sector organisation for older people), the BME Health Forum, local community centres and other migrant community organisations including Hodan Somali Community and Al Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre. Clients also contribute to the costs of some services, specifically the supplementary school. Additionally it has social enterprise ambitions, including wanting to start up a sewing group, but even these are limited by the lack of funding needed to get these projects off the ground. Yet despite these restrictions it is important to note that the advisory services—which in Waris' own words are “the most important and in demand aspect of our organisation” —continue, despite being entirely unfunded. It is important to understand that were Midaye not to provide these advisory services, the likely outcome would be an escalation of problems.

Midaye is also facing budget cuts and uncertainty for 2011/12. Its small core grant of £7,500 from RBKC has not been cut because it took a cut of 25% the year before. However it's funding from NHS Kensington and Chelsea has been substantially reduced despite the fact that it is now working in partnership to deliver its work with another local community organisation. Other public funding has been extended for three months until June 2011, but we do not know what will happen after that date.


midaye
Somali Development Network



End Notes

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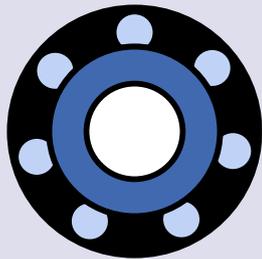
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Appendix

Questions asked for case studies

1. Why do you exist and why do you do what you do? What needs do you serve?
2. Basic info your organisation (how long have you existed, what is your annual turnover/budget)
3. Core activities: what services do you provide; what projects do you run?
4. Staff/Volunteers: how many people do you employ, how many volunteers you have, how many hours these volunteers work in your organisation?
5. How many clients do you serve per year (their age, gender, etc.), their needs, etc. How many community members/families do you assist?
6. Which organisations do you work with (statutory, voluntary, community) and what are you joint projects/collaboration? Examples are needed.
7. Your past and current initiatives
8. What kind of informal work do you do in your community (the one that you receive no funding for but you do anyway)?
9. What are the challenges your organisation faces in its work?
10. Tips for the future (what would you do if you had more money?)
11. Examples of how your work improved/changed lives in the community (client's stories).



M R C F

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