



Strangers or Citizens?



Refugee and migrant participation in local political processes in London

“If you think you're too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito in the room.”

Dame Anita Roddick

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Content

Introduction	1
About MRCF	2
Methodology	3
The context - Migrants, Refugees and Participation	3
Migrant and refugee settlement in the UK.....	3
Community empowerment?.....	5
Government ‘empowerment agenda’.....	5
Refugees and Migrants in London	8
Who did we contact through this research?.....	9
Refugee and migrant experiences of local politics in London	10
What does effective political participation look like for refugee and migrant communities in London?	10
Objectives of participation.....	10
How can communities’ objectives be met?.....	11
Claiming and creating space.....	12
What are the issues affecting participation of refugees and migrants?	12
Everyday circumstances and challenges.....	12
Relationships with local representatives.....	13
Belonging and identity.....	15
What can refugee and migrant communities do to shape better the political decisions that affect them?	16
Migrant and Refugee Community Organisations (MRCOs).....	16
Capacity and resources.....	17
Community representation and leadership.....	17
Conclusions	19
National tensions.....	19
Local solutions?.....	20
Principles for engagement - Recommendations	21
Bibliography	22
Appendices	23
Annex 1 – List of focus group participants.....	23



Introduction

Last year at the Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum (MRCF) we met thousands of migrants and refugees from nearly 60 countries. They came from all class and educational backgrounds. They were asylum seekers and highly skilled migrants, domestic workers and trafficked young people, men, women and children of all ages, sexual orientations, faiths and no faith.

The migration experience is a unique and very personal endeavour. Yet we have adopted a way of talking about migration as ‘forced’, ‘economic’, ‘illegal’, ‘bogus’ etc. and by sticking these labels on this experience we try to categorise, legislate and understand groups of individuals who for all sorts of reasons uprooted ‘their’ lives and are now our fellow citizens and whose attempts to live ordinary lives most of the time are perceived as a drain on ‘our’ resources. More often than not these perceptions are based not on direct encounters with migrants but instead on mediated experiences driven by media coverage that focuses on negative stereotypes. And so it is this perception of ‘them’ and the resulting treatment ‘they’ experience in their daily lives that is often the only commonality that can be clearly established as shared.

What migrants and refugees have in common is not their migration experience, even if they come from the same country, but the way they

experience integration in this country; their attempts to find out how to get treatment when they are sick, how to get a job, how to access education etc. And so it is the difficulties they tend to experience again and again that are the driving force behind self-organising in the form of community organisations. Country of origin and a shared language and culture are the most frequent organising principles for migrant groups. It is not uncommon that exceptional individuals with skills and resources become the agents of this self-organising and provide the support that closes the gaps.

But at a certain point these organised self-help groups emerge on the radar of all sorts of statutory and voluntary agencies and begin to occupy another role in society. They become a gateway point for all sorts of formal consultation and engagement strategies for service delivery. Ironically, in the whirlwind of consultations, commissions and service level agreements, self-organised communities begin to lose their voice as they no longer set the agenda and are listened to only in a very fragmented manner. So they become ‘clients’, ‘user groups’, ‘hard to reach’, and are pursued by all sorts of services providers who need to meet their targets of engaging with ‘user’ or ‘hard to reach’ communities. But when these groups have issues to raise, it is not so easy to find someone who will hear, let alone who will address their needs in all of their complexity.



MRCF members on the march for Strangers into Citizens, May 4th 2009

It is this gap and power dynamic that MRCF is trying to address in a series of meetings and reports. Within a limited budget and competing priorities we aim to stop, listen and record the current experiences of integration and social cohesion policies and practices for some of the migrants building and rebuilding their lives in London. We hope to take the debate away from sensationalist headlines about ‘waves’ and ‘tides’



and by adding migrants' voices facilitate learning and a positive change in the way we define 'our' shared experience of being good citizens. With this approach we may also learn how to welcome new citizens with ease and confidence.

The ability and confidence of new communities in the UK to take part in local governance processes is intertwined with many factors: national policies around diversity and community cohesion, the approach of local decision-makers and statutory bodies, and

internal community dynamics. This report draws on opinions and experiences about local participation in decision-making and service provision from a range of individuals from migrant communities in London. We have aimed to place these accounts within a wider policy context, highlighting some of the tensions in government policies. Finally the report aims to identify ways in which migrant and refugee communities in London can strengthen their engagement to make sure that their needs and interests can be better met by decision-makers.

About MRCF

MRCF is a user-led community empowerment alliance of 40 organisations, with 16 years experience of 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. MRCF proactively includes all migrants to London regardless of their country of origin or immigration status. MRCF supports a range of migrant communities, from those who have been in the UK for three generations, for example Moroccans, to asylum seekers from Iraq and A8 migrants. We deliver support through work with:

- organisations: we provide advice and infrastructure support to develop organisational capacity in governance, fundraising, project development, monitoring, evaluation and partnership working.
- communities: we provide communal space for engagement and support to raise a voice, for example through our Oral History Project¹.
- individuals: we provide advice and support in all areas of an individual's welfare for example through our Mental Health Mentoring Project and our Overseas Health Professionals Training and Employment Project which supports 3,000 doctors and dentists.
- statutory and voluntary organisations – we undertake partnership and policy work to improve services, develop good practice, influence policy and improve understanding of the needs of migrant and refugee communities, for example through our participation in the Independent Asylum Commission².

¹ See <http://www.moroccanmemories.org.uk/>

² See <http://www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk>



Methodology

The report draws upon themes arising from discussions at six 'Question Time' type events organised by MRCF between October 2008 and May 2009. Each meeting was attended by between thirty and sixty community representatives from at least fifteen different countries of origin, living and/or working in almost all local authorities in London. It also draws on MRCF's ongoing engagement with migrant and refugee community organisations working in London.

During the writing of the report, a series of targeted interviews were held with London Councillors and non-governmental organisations. MRCF and MRN also facilitated a

focus group as part of the research process attended by community representatives. A list of focus group participants can be found at the back of the report.

This report has drawn strongly on the research work carried out under the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) programme 'Unheard Voices: Power and Participation'³, it refers to many of the themes that have come out of this research, and applies them to the London context, and on MRCF's participation in the Carnegie UK Trust and JRF action research project on understanding power and influence⁴. A full list of referenced publications and documents is at the end of the report.

The context - Migrants, Refugees and Participation

For many migrant and refugee communities in the UK turning rights into reality is a significant challenge. Many of the decisions that affect their lives are made locally, but communities continue to report having only a limited ability to influence these decisions. The ability of diverse communities to shape their own lives has been affected by a policy framework which seems to undermine their confidence and skills to take part in political life.

The UK's political approach towards immigration has changed in response to substantial changes in immigration flows over the past fifteen years. In doing so it has also reframed national attitudes towards the rights of diverse communities living in the UK. How much space is there now for migrants and refugees to develop and drive forward their own agendas in the UK?

Migrant and refugee settlement in the UK

Immigration to the UK has significantly changed over the past 60 years, largely affected by wider geo-political circumstances. The majority of immigrants who came to the UK between the 1950s and 1970s originated from other Commonwealth countries, and many were invited to work in the UK. Because of their historical links to the UK, many of these new arrivals already held British nationality and, until 1981 at least, had the automatic 'right of abode' ('right to live') in the UK⁵.

But immigration to the UK began to rise in the early 1990s, as well as to become much more diverse. At this point there was a substantial increase in the numbers of economic migrants, foreign students and asylum-seekers coming to the UK from countries across the world without

³ See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/unheard-voices-power-and-participation>

⁴ See http://democracy.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/democracy/power_and_influence

⁵ Vertovec, S. (2007) 'Super-diversity and its implications' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29(6) www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/rers/2007/0000030/00000006/art00004



a strong connection to Britain. The dispersal of asylum seekers across the UK and the substantial number of migrants from the Central and Eastern European countries that joined the European Union in 2004 and 2007 affected many local communities in the UK that had had little previous experience of immigration.

The way that government has responded to these changes has affected the social context for refugee and migrant communities coming to the UK. Until the 1990s, there was a conspicuous lack of any formal integration policies relating to migrants, and there were very few formal attempts to communicate immigration issues in constructive ways to the British public generally and to local residents more specifically who experienced migration in their neighbourhoods.

Although the government was happy to claim that there were no problems in accommodating its increasingly diverse communities, the reality was more complicated⁶. At both national and local levels, residents were for the most part not given any information on who was coming into and settling in their areas. Similarly, new arrivals were generally left to negotiate the challenges of their life in the UK on their own. Although migrants were increasingly present in local communities across the country, they were largely absent from public life, including prominent positions within politics and the media.

The rise of diverse migration to the UK was met by increasing public concern about immigration and the 'changing face of Britain'. The language of policy-makers about local migrant and refugee communities changed, in response to the fear that *diverse* societies may be *divided* societies. In the context of increased immigration and super-diversity, policy-makers put the emphasis on 'community cohesion', within which new communities are expected to

take an active role in fitting in with local communities. Tony Blair coined the new approach in 2006 by declaring "*The right to be different. The duty to integrate. That is what being British means.*"⁷

This attitude has been reflected in the New Labour government's approach to the management of immigration more generally, aimed at restoring public confidence in the UK's immigration and asylum systems. Over the past five years in particular, the government has introduced a range of new policies claiming to be tough on immigration. The new managed migration system has aimed to 'make migration work for Britain'. It tightly defines the type of migrant considered beneficial for UK society, favouring high-earners, the highly-skilled and those who will 'fit into British society'. Local communities have been increasingly involved in monitoring and policing migrants, with the UK Border Agency prioritising in-country controls and the more public presence of immigration controls in local communities.

As part of this approach, a range of policy measures have been launched which appear to discourage different groups of migrants from building deeper ties and a sense of belonging with local communities. 'Tough' policies, such as dispersing asylum seekers across the UK, limiting healthcare and access to social benefits, reducing state funding for English as a Second Language classes and the voucher system for asylum seekers (now phased out), could all be seen as aiming at reducing the confidence and sense of belonging held by migrants in local areas, as well controlling immigration.

Policy developments currently underway in relation to these communities are likely to present new threats to their capacity and willingness to participate at a local level. It can be expected that, particularly as immigration enforcement mechanisms become increasingly

⁶ Zetter, R., Griffiths, D. And Sigona, N (2006), Immigration, social cohesion and social capital: What are the links?, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/9781899354440.pdf

⁷ Tony Blair speech at a Runnymede Trust event, 8th December 2006 <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page10563>



embedded at a local level through the emergence of new UK Border Agency 'Local Immigration Teams', further mistrust and reluctance to engage on the part of marginal communities will emerge⁸. In addition, changes underway to the naturalisation process plan to introduce 'earned citizenship'. The government's overhaul of these processes has 'active citizenship' at the heart of an envisioned longer and tougher path to British citizenship for migrants.

Community empowerment?

As the immigration agenda has shifted, so has the space in which migrant and refugee-led organisations can develop and advocate the interests and/or needs of their communities. Funding is moving from grants to individual organisations for community development to contracts for large consortiums for commissioned services⁹. This contract culture, which now governs the way many migrant and refugee-led organisations have to provide services, is endangering their ability for independent advocacy and grass roots agenda setting. At the local level there has also been a decrease in the availability of regeneration funding for local community organisations such as New Deal for Communities and Neighbourhood Renewal. As a result many large and established migrant and refugee organisations have had to close and/or are struggling to survive and meet the needs of their members. The dismantling of many local Race Equality Partnerships and the absence of a watchdog which can effectively monitor race relations within statutory organisations, has left migrant and refugee communities (in addition to wider minority communities) unsupported.

Various government strategy papers do

mention the need to bring migrant communities into the active process of 'cohesion'¹⁰, but there has been little investment in this process so far. Rather, major government funding streams are aimed at anti-terrorist initiatives, promotion of 'common values' and redefining the commitment to British citizenship and building infrastructure. Migrants increasingly appear on the government agenda as a 'problem' and infrastructure that has been built to address the needs of these communities is trapped within this negative discourse. And very rarely are the same resources being put into frontline community organisations so that they can respond to their needs on their own terms.

Government 'empowerment agenda'

Within the context of a new national policy towards immigration, the space, as defined by national government, for migrant communities to influence local decisions has become even more uncertain. Ongoing government attempts to define (and potentially own) the meaning of civic and political participation – and to identify who should be included and excluded from these processes – contribute to this. This begs the question: what could/should real political power look like for refugees and migrant communities in the UK today?

The roll-out of experimental government policies aiming to promote general community participation in local politics has been underway over the past ten years¹¹. The government 2008 White Paper: 'Communities in control: Real people, real power' outlined its aim to *"shift power, influence and responsibility away from existing centres of power into the hands of communities and*

⁸ See UKBA 'Enforcing the Deal', June 2008

⁹ Lukes, S., Jones, V. and San Juan, Y. (2009) The potential of migrant and refugee community organisations to influence policy, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
www.jrf.org.uk/publications/migrant-refugee-community-organisations-influence

¹⁰ See Department for Communities and Local Government, Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper (2006); Our Shared Future (2007)

¹¹ Barnes, M., Skelcher, C., Beirens, H., Dalziel, R., Jeffares, S. and Wilson, L. (2008) Designing citizen-centred governance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
www.jrf.org.uk/publications/designing-citizen-centred-governance



*individual citizens*¹². The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has led a series of initiatives claiming to devolve decision-making, and to support the engagement of communities, including service users, residents, citizens and other stakeholders with local governance. The government model of political participation hopes to get local communities to shape local services, allocation of resources and policy decisions. This can be done via information-sharing, active involvement of communities in making decisions about public services or politics, or communities taking control of certain projects.

The notion of a community empowerment agenda as defined by national government has not been uncontroversial. This report is concerned with how far refugee and migrant communities are affected by or engaged within these structures, and whether the empowerment agenda looks like it meets their needs.

So what does the government's local 'empowerment agenda' look like in practice? Reviews of the strategy have observed that community consultations concerning health, policing, education and other social issues are increasingly organised and run by local councils and public service providers to canvass wider perspectives on public services and governance¹³. Many local authorities have experimented with new initiatives including multi-agency partnerships and steering groups, which claim to draw voluntary and community sector organisations into decision-making¹⁴.

The DCLG has established new structures in many areas, including Local Area Agreements, Local Strategic Partnerships and Sustainable Community Strategies in order to support local engagement.

It is still too early to assess whether this new strategy of 'community empowerment' has been effective in drawing local residents into decision-making. A recent appraisal of this approach in June 2009 concludes, "*there is a gap between what has been promised and what is perceived to have been achieved so far*"¹⁵. It indicates that some people have been held back from getting involved in local 'empowerment' structures because they are too complicated. Residents have reported difficulty in understanding the multiple layers of decision-making and the demands of local-level bureaucracy in the government's new architecture¹⁶. Some people have also found that a quick turnover in new structures or local government schemes has discouraged them from getting involved.

Evaluation reports on the new empowerment agenda note that, in general, community engagement can result in those who are already involved becoming more so, whilst those who are excluded continue to be left out of these processes¹⁷. The government's national empowerment strategy does not explore the specific characteristics and needs of ethnically diverse communities, or identify how to support their interactions in local politics. The lack of priority given to this area from central government is likely to have contributed to a disjointed response at local level.

¹² Hazel Blears, in 'Communities in control: Real people, real power' White Paper, Department of Communities and Local Government, August 2008. It additionally identifies key issues which are central to local empowerment – 'being active in your community; access to information; having an influence; challenge; redress; standing for office; and ownership and control'.

¹³ Foot, J. (2009) Citizen involvement in local governance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/citizen-involvement-governance-summary.pdf

¹⁴ Empowering communities to influence local decision making: A systematic review of the evidence, DCLG, June 2009
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1241955>

¹⁵ Foot, J. (2009) Citizen involvement in local governance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/citizen-involvement-governance-summary.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid



A DCLG-commissioned report released in June 2009 reviewed the work of the empowerment agenda thus far. Its conclusions indicated that migrant and refugee communities can have a positive impact on local empowerment strategies, and that *“many new communities brought with them an appetite to be involved in local democratic processes and represented a welcome stimulus for the development of citizen governance”*¹⁸. Despite this, research has shown that minority and migrant communities are thus far unlikely to have been particularly involved in the new frameworks established by the government, whether through taking part in public service consultations, being on boards or forums, or building relationships with local politicians¹⁹. The Refugee Council reports that some local councils and service providers attempt to involve refugees in local

consultations. This is reportedly more frequently the case with Primary Care Trusts regarding healthcare and around community cohesion consultations²⁰.

In general, it seems that there is a need for local authorities, politicians and public services better to map out and consider the varied needs and communities within different areas. They also need to improve the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of local consultations and participatory processes. Newer communities, particularly those without permanent residence in the UK, are even more likely to be excluded by complicated local bureaucratic structures than other groups²¹. Similarly, equating the right to participate with having formal citizenship has also created barriers to refugee and migrant empowerment.

¹⁸ Department of Communities and Local Government (2008) Empowering communities to influence local decision making: A systematic review of the evidence', www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1241955

¹⁹ Blake, G., Diamond, J., Foot, J., Mayo, M., Shukra, K., Yarnit, M. (2008) Community engagement and community cohesion, Joseph Rowntree Foundation www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2227-governance-community-engagement.pdf

²⁰ Interview: Jonathon Ellis, Refugee Council

²¹ Barnes, M., Skelcher, C., Beirens, H., Dalziel, R., Jeffares, S. and Wilson, L. (2008) Designing citizen-centred governance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, www.jrf.org.uk/publications/designing-citizen-centred-governance



Refugees and Migrants in London

London, in addition to its history of hosting diverse communities, has been the destination of many recent newcomers to the UK. As such it provides a useful context for an exploration of the dynamics around the political engagement of refugees and migrants.

A closer look at the spread of migrant and refugee communities in London indicates that the capital city has the highest concentration of diverse communities of any area in the UK. According to the 2001 census, London contains 19 of the local authorities with the highest percentage of non-EU born populations in the country²². Communities living in London are not generally concentrated in one or two geographical areas. According to the Greater London Authority in 2005, almost all migrant groups are spread out across a number of different boroughs across the capital²³.

Flexible (and often temporary) employment prospects outside London contribute towards a high level of 'churn', or population movement, among migrants and non-migrants, as people move in and out of the capital according to the opportunities open to them. Although this report focuses on the London context – a city in which approximately a third of all residents were born outside the UK²⁴ – the report has drawn on research from elsewhere in the UK. It is likely that the themes highlighted here will be indicative of, and/or related to, issues emerging more widely.

The development of regional Strategic Migration Partnerships – regional multi-agency partnerships between politicians and stakeholders around immigration issues – aims

to be a forum for local issues arising from immigration to the region. As such the London Strategic Migration Partnership (LSMP), still under development in 2009, should to some extent enable the presence of migrant and refugee interests in the politics of the capital city. Run by the Greater London Authority (GLA), it is taking the place of the former Board for Refugee Integration in London, expanding its remit to a wider range of migration-related issues. Effectively the LSMP will act as a multi-agency partnership drawing together the GLA, Association of London Government, and a number of stakeholder organisations concerned with refugee and migration issues in London. The key role for migrants and refugees in this structure is through an advisory group, with nominated members of communities selected by the GLA.

A number of London-based voluntary sector organisations are concerned with supporting wider civic participation of communities and some with migrant and refugee communities in particular. Organisations such as Operation Black Vote, Race on the Agenda, British Muslims for Secular Democracy and the Black Neighbourhood Renewal and Regeneration Network, aim to build the capacity and confidence of people from minority communities to take part in local and national politics. Although these organisations take different approaches in their work, all support local communities in advocating their particular interests within the mainstream democratic system.

The work of wider networks including London Civic Forum and the Citizen Organising

²² Vertovec, S. (2007) 'Super-diversity and its implications' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29(6) www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/rers/2007/00000030/00000006/art00004

²³ GLA, 2005

²⁴ Office of National Statistics statistics (2007) London population and migration statistics 2007 <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/ci/nugget.asp?id=2235>



Foundation (led by London Citizens in the capital city) aims to build confidence to identify and tackle social issues, many of which concern migrant and refugee communities. London Citizens, of which MRCF is a member, in particular, links communities together to create a broad support base for targeted social campaigns. Although the campaigns often target political decision-makers, a core tenet of London Citizens' work is that the work be led by community interests.



MRCF members on the march for Strangers into Citizens, May 4th 2009

Who did we contact through this research?

During the course of this research, we drew together a range of perspectives and personal experiences from migrants and refugees about local political participation in London. The key source of information was a series of 'Question Time' type public meetings held during 2008-09 as part of MRCF's Engage to Change project. These meetings enabled migrants and refugees to set an agenda and question a diverse group of speakers, such as the leader of Brent Council who is from a refugee family and local councillors from Hackney and Hillingdon who are also themselves migrants. Other speakers at these Engage to Change meetings have included the Chief Executive of the Stephen Lawrence Trust, the editor of Open Democracy, the lead organiser for West London Citizens, the

Chair of Newham Primary Care Trust and Tony Benn, former government minister and campaigner for social justice. One meeting involved a visit by forty-two international and UK MPs and peers to the MRCF centre as part of an international conference on immigration and trafficking.

In June 2009 a focus group was held with 11 migrants and refugees. Participants were mainly drawn from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in West London, and the borough of Newham, in East London. They originated from a wide range of African countries as well as from former Eastern European countries. Targeted individual interviews also took place.



Refugee and migrant experiences of local politics in London

Overall, the accounts gathered during the course of this research indicated that migrants and refugees from many different backgrounds would be interested in engaging more closely with local governance structures and would see value in doing so. But they also exposed a range of complex issues around community empowerment, social capital and race relations.

Throughout the discussions with refugees and migrants that fed into this paper, three core and underlying questions emerged:

1. What does effective political participation look like for refugee and migrant communities?
2. What are the issues affecting participation of refugees and migrants?
3. What can refugee and migrant communities do to shape better the political decisions that affect them?

What does effective political participation look like for refugee and migrant communities in London?

Accompanying the growth of the government's community empowerment agenda, a range of phrases and concepts have become more familiar – 'political participation', 'community empowerment', 'citizen governance', and 'civic engagement', to name a few. This research process attempted to explore what these concepts meant for refugees and migrants – did they translate into something meaningful?

Objectives of participation

Much of the discussion revolved around identifying types of political participation, and the spaces within which it would constitute

'successful' or 'meaningful' political engagement. We were interested in looking at why refugees and migrants should or would be interested to involve themselves in local political processes, and what the objectives or perceived outcomes for this would be.

During the course of this research the following motivations emerged among members of refugee and migrant communities for engaging with mainstream politics:

- To get our issues on the political agenda
- To help ensure that the needs of our communities are met
- To make sure that local services are geared towards us
- To be represented and not ignored
- To feel included in local communities

These objectives are unlikely to be exclusive to refugee and migrant communities, and are echoed in wider research into 'citizen involvement'. A review of evidence for JRF indicates that political participation, for any community, is generally geared towards meeting the following key objectives:

1. to improve the design and responsiveness of services and thereby improve outcomes such as social inclusion, equality, and service satisfaction;
2. to create links between communities and providers, and between different communities; this builds social capital and improves social cohesion, i.e. it improves networks, understanding and co-operation;
3. to improve the quality of decision-making and the legitimacy and accountability of local governance institutions and partnerships; this builds trust in democratic institutions and encourages civic participation.'



In order to meet these objectives, people's involvement should be a consistent process that is embedded in the political agendas of authorities and public services. Communities need to be engaged in a long-term relationship with local authorities, rather than being required or permitted to input on an ad hoc basis. The depth of engagement and influence is also critical - whether communities feel that they can influence not just the decisions that are made but the strategic direction of public and political bodies working in their local area is key to effective participation²⁵.

These principles may seem ambitious, particularly in relation to marginalised social groups, such as refugees and migrants. But there are strong incentives for local authorities and public services to facilitate effective engagement, beyond the objectives of meeting the needs of refugee and migrant communities. The positive outcome for wider society of genuine and diverse political participation can include building trust and wider social networking, supporting the overall development of stronger communities. Civil engagement can be an important way of building trust and confidence between communities, and of making connections above and beyond ethnic or national differences²⁶.

How can communities' objectives be met?

As well as having to manage the specific power dynamics associated with migration and integration, refugee and migrant communities encounter the power dynamics that can prevent many other social groups from engaging in a satisfactory way with mainstream political processes. Who decides how communities should be involved, if at all, in local decision-making? Who sets the agendas for local discussion meetings? Which bodies decide when meetings or consultations take

place, and how the information about this is to be shared around the wider community?

The following breakdown of engagement 'spaces' associates different types of participation with different power dynamics:

- **closed spaces** – where decisions are made behind closed doors and there is no pretence of including wider stakeholders in the process. This could include private meetings within local authorities or public services, to which wider community members are not invited.
- **invited spaces** – where various authorities invite individuals and groups to contribute to or comment on a process which they have initiated and have a certain amount of control over. This includes many national and local government consultation processes.
- **created or claimed spaces** – where processes are set up and driven by less powerful actors who set their own terms of engagement and priorities. These may be those spaces set up by community groups themselves, such as local meetings, roundtable discussions or events²⁷.

Involvement in local political processes for refugee and migrant communities often takes place in **invited spaces** through requests to take part in consultations, for example on the location of services, or to be involved in a local strategic partnership or other partnership bodies or forums. Although there is scope for invited spaces to become spaces for genuine collaboration and partnership working, there is often little scope for in-depth influence of the agenda, leading to a sense that engagement has been sought more to tick consultation boxes rather than because real change is desired or possible.

²⁵ Foot, J. (2009) Citizen involvement in local governance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/citizen-involvement-governance-summary.pdf

²⁶ Blake, G, Diamond, J, Foot, J, Mayo, Marjorie, Shukra, Kalbir,

Yarnit, Martin, (2008) Community engagement and community cohesion, Joseph Rowntree Foundation ,
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2227-governance-community-engagement.pdf>

²⁷ Carnegie UK Trust (2008) Power Moves, Carnegie UK Trust



“It’s difficult because they [politicians] have their agenda, they are working in a parliamentary system, and if it’s not in the party’s agenda, it doesn’t matter how much you shout... I’ve been trying to feed back into the system the issues from the Somali community but it’s difficult...”
(focus group participant)

Taking part in such ‘invited’ processes is not necessarily straightforward. Participation may not lead to very tangible positive outcomes for communities and can feel like politicians and service providers have benefited more than local communities from their engagement, but it may have positive elements. Sometimes, whether or not it has ‘made any difference’, the process of being heard and entering into an invited space may be a valuable experience for community members.



MRCF Engage to Change meeting November 2009

Claiming and creating space

The importance of claiming or creating space in which political engagement can be shaped and driven by communities is critical to more ongoing and meaningful political empowerment. Power is often thought of as being external and negative - power over refugee and migrant communities. But local communities can have their own positive power to shape their lives and relationships with wider society. It is when refugee and migrant

communities self organise to create or claim space that the opportunities for greater influence and more sustainable political engagement could open up.

What are the issues affecting participation of refugees and migrants?

The community members interviewed during the course of this report identified a range of issues that affected the ways in which they felt able to get involved in local political activities. Many of these issues were similar to those faced by other excluded groups, pointing out the limitations of mainstream structures to relate to diverse identities and particular needs and interests. Other issues reported by refugee and migrant communities were specific to them, and related to the effects of national policies and public attitudes which can directly undermine their interests and involvement at a local level.

Everyday circumstances and challenges

“It’s important to categorise migrants to address the problems associated with approaching local Councillors. New and more settled migrants do not have the same preoccupations. People who feel established are more likely to get involved in politics while the newly arrived are concerned with transforming their social and economic status within the UK community. Some would not be interested in dealing with MPs and politics unless it’s a question of status and possible removal.”
(focus group participant)²⁸

As with any other group individuals from refugee and migrant communities may have widely different interests, perceptions, and constraints which impact on their life in the UK. A wide range of personal circumstances can affect the attitudes of first generation migrants and new community groups towards community engagement and local politics.

²⁸ Focus group, June 4th 2009



Immigration status emerged throughout the course of the research as a significant issue for UK residents without British citizenship, with huge implications for their rights and entitlements, as well as their sense of confidence and belonging. People with temporary or insecure permission to be in the UK may be unwilling to connect with community campaigns or with local mainstream politics, for fear of putting their situation in jeopardy. This was thought to include asylum seekers, migrants with insecure circumstances or those lacking legal immigration status, who may not want to make themselves visible in the public sphere.

The amount of time planned for staying in the UK is also likely to affect willingness or need for representation and influence over decision-making. Interviewees reported that new communities who plan to go back to their home country will invest less in these processes than groups who have developed a sense of place and home which allows for greater confidence in manoeuvring in their social environment. Time already spent in the UK can also be a significant factor. Established ethnic minority groups are more likely to know the routes to access formal governance structures, as well as to have the language and confidence to use these routes. While some communities may be relatively familiar and comfortable with local governance (often more established communities), for others, factors such as language, literacy, gender, or age can be influential in terms of the perception of their rights, place and role in society, and consequently of local politics.

Socio-economic circumstances play a role in how far people are able to advocate their own interests. In the case of many recently arrived economic migrants and refugees, long hours spent working on often low wages, lack of transport or childcare will prevent the amount of time available to keep in touch with local matters and participation in meetings or forums.

In addition as refugees, asylum seekers, and many other migrants are often themselves the victims of politics in their countries of origin, they might feel mistrust towards the political system and therefore rely on informal networks rather than lobbying for their needs within formal structures:

“In cases like the Roma or Romanians, the political system back home is very corrupted and politicians aren’t interested in sorting out people’s problems. People are therefore not used to using the political system as a resource. They’ll tend to use their informal networks to solve problems. It makes it hard for the community to become more visible and to become politically engaged here”.

(focus group participant)²⁹

Relationships with local representatives

Discussions which fed into this report turned up very few examples of systematic approaches on the part of local councils and local representatives to draw migrants and refugee groups into local politics. This would indicate that, in addition to the lack of a national policy to empower marginalised communities, many individual local authorities also lack their own policies or strategies to specifically target these groups. In this case it is down to individual councillors and MPs, or local statutory bodies, to develop initiatives aimed at drawing in migrant and refugee communities.

Amongst the participants of the focus group carried out for this research, experiences of engagement with local representatives appeared to be varied in quality and extensiveness. Some interviewees had had direct communication, both successfully and unsuccessfully, with their local MPs and councillors. Others expressed dissatisfaction that, despite their involvement in local community organisations, they had never been contacted by local decision-makers.

²⁹ Focus group, June 4th 2009



“On a personal level, I’ve not had any communication with local MPs. As an organisation representative, we don’t really have any communication with them either. I don’t know whether it’s because we’re not making enough effort on our side, or if they aren’t. (...). The only time I’ve seen MPs was during their campaigning to get votes. Other than that, I don’t really see them or hear anything from them. In my opinion they don’t get as involved as they should with key groups and communities (...). I’ve never been approached... but I’d like to get more involved if they were more engaged”.
(focus group participant)³⁰

MPs were reported to sometimes show negative attitudes to the issues raised by local residents, or were not always responsive to their requests. Focus group participants, echoed by previous research, mentioned that even people who have had political and social influence in their country of origin can find it difficult to secure a place for themselves and their community in decision-making processes in the UK.

The attitudes of local politicians towards diverse communities can make a big difference for, and leave a lasting impression on communities. One man from the Somali community in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, for example, reported being approached by a Councillor candidate in the run-up to a local election. When he told the candidate about his concerns over the high number of dogs in the local area, he was told that “the dogs belong here”. He reported feeling that the candidate was implying that, although the dogs may belong to the local community, he did not.

Despite some refugee and migrant individuals and community organisation leaders having had positive experiences in approaching their local MPs, accounts overall indicated great

discrepancies in responses and attitudes towards them from local representatives. This seemed to depend on the circumstances within various London boroughs, the political inclination of community leaders and the individuals they came across within local structures:

“Politicians choose to engage with people who have the same point of view as them and who agree with the majority. Others are seen as troublemakers. They don’t want to put their agenda in jeopardy”
(focus group participant)³¹

Others felt that local politicians were inconsistent in responding to their concerns. This could reflect the lack of an inclusive government policy to tackle the interests of these groups, and indicates the need for the development of common practice about the inclusion of refugee and migrant groups and/or the general bureaucratic nature of most local government:

“If you invite MPs to your events, they will come. For some reason if you invite Councillors or Mayors they don’t.... But I think it has to do with individuals rather than the system. You see differences from one borough to another”.
(focus group participant)³²

“When I went to an MRCF meeting with migrant and refugee Councillors from three London Boroughs, it was very interesting to hear about their personal motivations and stories, but when they started talking about the business of local politics, all the passion was gone and we entered the world of faceless bureaucracy we could not relate to.”
(community worker)

³⁰ Focus group, June 4th 2009

³¹ Focus group, June 4th 2009

³² *ibid*



Local Councillors at MRCF Engage to Change meeting
November 2008

Belonging and identity

The government focus on British national identity and common values, accompanied by rising concerns about competition for resources and national safety, was seen by some research participants as having fed into a wider mistrust of new migrants, refugees and asylum seekers within local communities. Voicing of negative perspectives by mainstream politicians and the media about immigration and migrants was reported to have significantly contributed to feelings of disillusion and de-motivation by some new migrants. Some focus group participants expressed their concern that many community members still do not feel accepted by society, despite having settled and created integrated organisations within their local boroughs.

The importance of being accepted by society as a whole was stressed in its ability to validate a sense of potential belonging to the UK, or a neighbourhood:

“The government’s agenda for community cohesion, to put people of different backgrounds, cultures and beliefs into one boat, asks a lot from migrants and BME communities. It needs to be a two-way thing. Migrants are asked to change but the

host community has to be willing to change too, to some extent, and accommodate other cultures and beliefs. We encourage our youth to adapt and find their way through the system. It’s the only way and it’s crucial for public awareness for BMEs but also for wider society to face the issues that concern us all”
(focus group participant)³³

One interviewee felt that mistrust among his local community towards the main political parties had been fed by their stance on the international “war on terror” and the discourse it carries, which serves to justify the tighter closing of the UK borders. He felt that immigrants in the UK had been demonised by the government, which had further undermined their potential ability to build solidarity with other groups and wider society:

“On the other side, on the status side there are barriers. People are worried about whether they will be allowed to stay in this country, if they’ll be removed, how long they’re going to be here and you never know what’s happening with immigration policy. (...) If immigration says policy is going to change, we are going to give you permanent residence but we are not going to give you citizenship (...) What is the message we are giving to the people? How far can people think they can trust and feel that they are part of it? If you feed them that kind of situation people will feel that they don’t belong here and they won’t commit.”
(Paul Sathianesan)³⁴

This raises further issues, as people are forced to construct their sense of identity and belonging in British society in response to discrimination and racism embodied in public opinion and rhetoric. Inevitably their willingness to participate in decision-making processes will be affected by exclusive discourses and practice:

³³ Focus group, June 4th 2009

³⁴ Interview, 2nd June 2009



“Even if youngsters consider themselves as British, if they are told they can’t have their other identity... it’s gonna give them more incentive to hold onto it”
(focus group participant)³⁵

What can refugee and migrant communities do to shape better the political decisions that affect them?

Experiences indicated that local political processes are frequently not well-g geared towards the needs and interests of migrant and refugee communities. But what of the agency of communities to bring about positive change for themselves?

Migrant and Refugee Community Organisations (MRCOs)

In the focus group community organisation emerged as key to defining spaces of power, developing influence and building a base of support around social issues to affect change. All informants agreed on the importance of MRCOs as a vital tool for strengthening the voice of their group while more efficiently securing their place in the social and political realm. Groups, and collective action more generally, were seen as a key means of accessing power, and ensuring that their issues were met.

“If several groups come together they are more likely to achieve what they are looking for... If people have the same issues and they get together, then their voice is much more powerful.”
(focus group participant)³⁶

The weakness of and tensions within some MRCOs emerged as a major theme. Some participants agreed that this was detrimental to the development of social capital that could help them to participate in mainstream society

and benefit from greater service provision. Indeed this echoes the central argument made by a London Citizens community organiser at an MRCF Engage to Change Meeting on community organising who challenged migrant and refugee communities about their division and lack of strategic organising as a weakness that undermines their potential for influence³⁷.

Within the context of the community cohesion agenda and concern with the self-segregation of communities, the role and workings of some minority communities have received new attention in relation to their contribution towards the integration of new migrants. Although perspectives canvassed through this research acknowledged the challenges of building and sustaining effective organisations that can support the integration of new citizens, they still mainly advocated the value of community activity and informal networks as a platform for gathering the personal and collective capital needed to access mainstream services and through that more political participation.

In addition MRCOs can face difficulties in stepping outside the immediate role of providing community support. Such organisations often arise as a response to unmet needs within communities, and group leaders may find themselves filling the gaps in mainstream service provision. It is worth noting that while these informal networks may benefit communities in terms of the development of social capital, it is important to look at who they benefit. They may provide well for some people but not for others. For example, many MRCOs develop strong informal networks to support their most vulnerable members, but in the process fail to engage so many other community members who have less apparent and/or pressing needs but may have more capacity for mainstream political participation. This in some cases can leave a misleading impression that all members of migrant and refugee communities are needy and vulnerable.

³⁵ Focus group, June 4th 2009

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ Engage to Change meeting, December 15th 2008



Capacity and resources

In terms of social organisation, research participants reported that new migrant and refugee communities are often small and face practical and economic challenges in building associations which can advocate their interests.

“We have to address the importance of capacity building. You have to be strong enough to defend yourself. It might be better to link up with mainstream organisations to build common ground and shared values, so the establishing comes from different quarters, not only from small minorities but also with mainstream society. It’s very difficult for small minorities to take on their issues all by themselves and it would be very useful to build cohesion.”

(focus group participant)³⁸

But despite the number of external barriers that refugees and new migrants face in engaging with mainstream structures, some focus group participants emphasised the need for MRCOs to be proactive in trying to overcome these obstacles.

“Sometimes you think they might not listen to you because you think you are a lone voice, but I think unless you try you can never know. When I came to this country in the early ‘90s, Sierra Leone had a war, but with a few people lobbying directly in parliament (...) managed to get visas, get the extended family to come (...). Sometimes if you knock at the door some of them do listen. (...) It’s not gonna be a one-way thing, they aren’t gonna do everything so you have to work for yourself to get things...”

(focus group participant)³⁹

A common theme from research participants who represented MRCOs was that of having a

‘voice’ and finding strategies to make that voice be heard for the benefit of their community, but also of other groups. Objections to the categorisation of migrants and refugees as somehow inherently ‘hard to reach’ also emerged.

“Why do we talk about hidden communities? Where are they hiding? They are within the community, so how do we see them as hidden? We need to break those cycles and barriers.”

(Paul Sathianesan)

For some participants, the way forward for making their voices heard depends on capacity building, through bridge-building and the construction of alliances with other community organisations that share similar needs.

Other research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and echoed by participants for this research, shows that the effectiveness of community-focused partnerships can be reduced by internal frictions. Key areas where tensions can arise are where there are inequalities in power between partners, or competition caused by perceptions that sharing power with others will jeopardise access to funding or resources. Conflicting agendas, different values and a lack of communication were at the core of the problematic relationship between groups. However, the operation of political partnership structures also appears to depend on the government’s approach to community development and civic leadership, in which councils’ local structures dominate hierarchies of power⁴⁰.

Community representation and leadership

Community organisations are a critical base for bringing communities together, but even when they do have organised and formal structures they may be ignored by formal power

³⁸ Cherti, M. (2009), British Moroccans- Citizenship in action, Runnymede Trust
www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/British_Moroccans-2009.pdf

³⁹ Focus group, June 4th 2009

⁴⁰ Focus group, June 4th 2009



structures at local and national levels. To bring about change successfully over key issues affecting communities, it was seen as necessary for someone reliable from the community to stand up as a representative or spokesperson. But identifying someone who could legitimately and effectively speak for the community, can cause huge tensions within communities. While good representation of community interests was seen as vital for them to engage with and access local political structures, interviewees during the course of this research expressed concerns about the nature and impact of community representation and leadership.

A widely reported issue was the fact that representatives, sometimes self-appointed, might act in an individual capacity rather than on behalf of the group as a whole. As a result, some members of community groups had found themselves relying on individuals they might judge as inappropriate in representing them. Although this tension is widely experienced across many different communities and interest groups, there may be particular aggravating factors for migrant and refugee communities in this respect. Language barriers or lack of familiarity with political or social structures outside the community can impede confidence for mobilisation and lobbying and therefore exclude many with other valid skills for community representation.

In this case, rather than acting as facilitators, individual community representatives may serve as 'gatekeepers', blocking communication with and failing to pass on information to the community or involve other members directly in key events. The emergence of a well-known individual within a community organisation can potentially hold back the progress of that organisation within its own right⁴¹.

"There are gaps in the involvement of communities and in community leadership. Some representatives come to meetings, but it stays within them and it doesn't go back into the community. We need to improve that capacity and we need to engage future leaders into wider themes." (Paul Sathanesian)

Although not discussed during the research for this report, other accounts have described the personal tensions that can arise for those 'representatives' who become known as willing to speak out about, or on behalf of their communities. By bridging the gap between grassroots concerns and more formal structures, they may find they have less time to be involved in their communities, leading to personal dilemmas about the quality and legitimacy of their work⁴².

⁴¹ Rai, S. (2008) Routes and barriers to citizen governance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
www.jrf.org.uk/publications/routes-and-barriers-citizen-governance

⁴² Focus group, June 4th 2009



Conclusions

The tensions and dynamics identified in the introduction to this report were largely reflected in the discussion about migrants' direct experiences in the London context. Questions about what constitutes effective political participation, and how far communities can be active in setting their own political agendas, emerged and re-emerged throughout the discussions which fed into this report.

National tensions

It is clear that the wider context within which refugees and migrants may seek to meet their particular interests is likely to become more difficult, and that the emerging debate on Britishness, identity and belonging are confusing the process of integration. Negotiating the terms of their civic participation are made much more difficult for these communities given a political context in which they find themselves the target of restrictive politics and increasingly differentiated from the rest of society. This is likely to feed into reduced social capital and personal stability of many migrants and refugees in the UK.

The government is increasingly preoccupied with the rights of citizens to influence the decisions that may affect them. It has not yet explored the specific characteristics and needs of new migrant and refugee communities, or identified how to support their engagement in local politics. The government's analysis of these communities has primarily focused on the impact of migration and of migration policy on local areas. There has been little systematic attempt to analyse the ways in which migrants and refugees could be supported to engage with local decision-making processes, thereby supporting their social integration⁴³.

The political differentiation between 'citizens' and 'non-citizens' ignores the complexity of the UK population. Settling in a country does not mean that a person is assimilated into one particular cultural framework, or that they solely feel a sense of belonging to that place. Many Moroccans, for example, live between the UK and Morocco, in a similar way to the way in which many British people share their time between the UK and Spain, France or Greece. In fact the sense of belonging and rights which may be at the core of effective participation is much more complex than this over-simplified distinction at the heart of government policy.

By promoting citizenship, 'citizen-centred governance' and 'British values', the government emphasises the importance of citizenship in defining the relationships between, and rights of, individuals, local communities and the state. The concern for advocates of migrant and refugee rights is that government policies will instead further stratify the rights and responsibilities of 'newcomers' and 'citizens', creating more entrenched barriers for new communities. Migrant and refugee communities will continue, inevitably, to be sidelined as a result of restrictions placed on immigration and citizenship. This is despite many being settled local residents, who often see the value in taking part in decisions⁴⁴. The 'us' and 'them' division integral to this approach risks having a serious impact, reinforcing wider misperceptions that refugees and migrants are less entitled to have their needs and interests met in the UK than British citizens.

As outlined in the introduction to this report, refugee and migrant community members increasingly find themselves trapped between

⁴³ Foot, J. (2009) Citizen involvement in local governance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/citizen-involvement-governance-summary.pdf

⁴⁴ See DCLG reports: Managing the Impacts of Migration: Improvements and Innovations, March 2009; Managing the Impacts of Migration: A Cross-Government Approach, June 2008; Review of Migrant Integration Policy in the UK, June 2008



the conflicting objectives and confused rationale behind government policies. On the one hand, new communities are expected to integrate into the wider societies in which they live as a condition of living in the UK. On the other hand, their participation, already more difficult, is further undermined by the steady development of aggressive immigration policies, and by a local engagement agenda which fails to offer a systematic strategy for empowering them.

Local solutions?

Despite this context, it is critical that political participation is not portrayed as a battle between communities and the national government, according to the terms of engagement set by the latter. This is a battle for empowerment that local communities are unlikely to feel they can 'win'. The terms of engagement could perhaps be more effectively negotiated at a local level. Some participants reported the development of a mutual 'blame game' at a local level, whereby local government and communities both blame one another for the insufficient lack of community representation. A way forward could be for both local authorities and refugee and migrant communities to ask themselves important questions about the ways in which they approach one another and how such interactions could be more constructive.

The discussions that fed into this report indicated that the concepts of 'political

engagement', 'citizen governance' and 'political participation' – core principles at the heart of the government's empowerment agenda – need to be thought through and most importantly reclaimed by communities themselves. As these communities find themselves sidelined and undermined by government policies, there is even more of a need for them to stake out their own ground via which their perspectives, concerns and requirements can be voiced. This would involve considering the ways in which they organise and represent themselves, and the strategic implications of the ways in which they work with local government structures in the UK.

Although engaging or communicating with local government and public services can be useful it is clearly not sufficient for refugee and migrant communities to effectively pursue their interests. Many members of these communities would actively like to strengthen their presence and influence within mainstream political or public processes. But judging by past experiences, this will not come about without a more targeted organisation of communities themselves, and a clearer identification of the needs and interests to be pursued. Better clarity and transparency about what can reasonably be achieved by engagement with local processes is needed to establish the limits of an empowerment agenda which is led by the national government. Refugee and migrant communities need to balance a measured participation in mainstream decision-making processes, with a sense of their own right to set agendas rather than follow them.



Principles for engagement - Recommendations

- Migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs) must be strategic and focused – what are the issues that would make a difference to local communities, and who needs to be targeted in order to make the necessary changes? Many community organisations to some extent already do this, but their resources are very limited and they do not always identify this strategic approach and activity as a part of their role. As their capacity is already overstretched in providing services, additional resources and training are required to support this engagement function.
- MRCOs need to make better use of existing civic networks to make their voices heard and mainstream their participation. Citizenship training and education aimed at new migrants should also provide them with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to be active citizens.
- MRCOs have a hugely important role to play in shaping local and regional networks such as the London Strategic Migration Partnership. They need to consider how they can best use the experiences of their communities to inform the work of these structures. Their contribution needs to be part of an ongoing engagement between local and regional government and migrant communities and not about ad hoc consultation exercise. Strangers can only become citizens when we start treating them as such.
- Local authorities and public services need to make the necessary changes in their structures that would enable them to engage with migrant and refugee communities in a mutually beneficial and appropriate manner. These changes include more outreach work to listen to and appreciate the day to day challenges and experiences of MRCOs and the improvement of strategies for institutional learning to ensure the creation of institutional memory and the continuity of good practice.
- MRCOs have expertise that can inform and improve policies and practice to meet the integration needs of their users. They need to be recognised for their expertise and engaged to contribute to solutions. But an important distinction needs to be made here with political processes. MRCOs are not the democratic representatives of entire communities and they do not exist in a parallel democratic universe. Migrants and refugees are citizens and their representation can only be addressed through their full participation and inclusion in mainstream civic and democratic processes and institutions.
- Second-tier organisations working with MRCOs need to have a more strategic and coordinated approach to engagement and empowerment that is responsive to MRCO needs and participatory and mainstreaming in its methodology. The engagement work of these organisations is often focused on achieving a strategic voice at a national policy level and these organisations often struggle with resources and powerlessness in their own right. Additional capacity building and resources need to be invested into work to expand their engagement and participation work at a local level.



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Appendices

Annex 1 – List of focus group participants

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