



Report to the Membership from the Chair of the Board of Trustees, Elizabeth Sunduzwayo on behalf of the Trustees

AGM 11th September 2012

Summary of Regional Refugee Forum North East Work & Achievements 2011-12

The Forum was created by the region's Refugee led Community Organisations (RCOs) 11 years ago. Its founding aim was for the region's community of refugees and asylum seekers to work together to produce and use their Collective Voice, strategically, to influence policy and practice that are the systemic, root causes of the poverty, disadvantage and exclusion they experience in their daily lives. Its mission is to empower the community with the skills, knowledge and confidence to speak up for itself, to be actors in the process promoting integration and social justice – rather than rely on others to speak for us, or about us.

Through the Forum's support and work, we aim to transform our members lives on two levels: the first level is the change we manage to create in policy and services, so that all Refugees and Asylum seekers have the opportunity to be full, equal and active citizens in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the region; on the second level, by genuinely being actively involved – by being *part of the process* through which those changes are brought about - our members gain the essential knowledge, skills, networks and confidence to be activists in further and future change.

We need of course to find the right platforms to raise our Voice at, and contribute our evidence. But first we need to develop our Voice to make the most effective case for change. This involves supporting members to

- Reach a shared understanding of root causes of the disadvantages we face. We need to gather an evidence base that clearly demonstrates causality and impact on our lives
- Reach a shared understanding of the most effective solutions: so that together we produce clear and consistent recommendations for policy makers and service providers to act on

Each RCO is of course delivering unique and valuable support to its community through a wide range of activities, and creating a bridge linking the community to other communities and to services. And exciting new enterprises are emerging. We respect the huge amount of time and commitment you give and congratulate you for your achievements. The Forum's staff team provides a range of support to help you develop and deliver your plans, gain knowledge and skills, and access wider networks and partnerships. Our support is delivered as participatory planning sessions, network events, training sessions, arranging learning visits across the UK, and bringing members together to learn from each other's experience and successes. Over the last year 158 members of 62 refugee led initiatives, including 23 new RCOs, have received this support.

At our General Meetings last December, members asked the Trustees to organise regular meetings in each area. So in January this year we began our monthly 'Network' meetings in Wearside, Tees Valley and Tyneside. These meetings have been very popular and well

attended. So far, they have brought together RCOs and representatives from over 40 agencies. They are an opportunity for sharing and exchanging information on health, community safety and economic inclusion. Our members have gained greater knowledge about the range of services and support available to their communities. And agencies are more aware of the work of RCOs and the issues facing our communities. These Network meetings are also valuable moments for our members to share problems, ideas and information, and plan together.

However, the purpose of this report is to evaluate progress against the core aim of the Forum: We need to ask, what impact have we had through our collective advocacy? What successes can we be most proud of? How are we currently positioned to achieve influence? Are we on the right platforms and have we gained the right credibility and reputation to achieve real influence? This is a chance to get an overall view, as you may not realise how much is being achieved across the organisation.

To influence change, we have worked on 3 levels of advocacy:

1. Awareness raising: Much of the hostile or discriminatory treatment we face comes from ignorance or from negative media images of asylum seekers and refugees. By helping people to understand more about who asylum seekers and refugees really are, the situation they face, and their aspirations we can help change peoples' attitudes. This can lead to vital changes in behaviour, of the public and of front line service providers, and remove some of the barriers and negativity we face in our daily lives.

2. Influencing Services: Policies are implemented on the ground as services. By giving service providers our evidence of the specific barriers we face, of what doesn't work and what does, and by providing constructive recommendations about how to improve their service, we can influence the way that policies are actually implemented and promote equality of opportunity for our members.

3. Challenging Policy: There are some things we face that cannot be resolved by raising awareness or by influencing the way services are delivered. Because it is the actual Policy that is creating the problems we face. Some policies are developed at a local authority level, or a regional level – and we can use our voice to challenge them and to provide evidence so they can develop better policies. We contribute to advisory and planning groups, and arrange consultations to ensure policy makers hear our voice. We have also developed partnerships with the region's universities and contribute to the Institute of Public Policy Research. We are contributing to research on Race, Crime & Justice, on the impact of spending cuts, on poverty and economic inclusion, and on community empowerment, all of which will report to policy makers in the region and Government departments. But the Policies that cause the most poverty, insecurity, dehumanisation and destitution faced by many of our members - specifically, Asylum and Migration Policy – are created at the national level, by the Government. To influence these policies we must lobby Members of Parliament, the House of Lords and Government departments. Our best strategy is to connect ourselves to national advocacy movements, and contribute our voice to their work focused on lobbying Westminster.

We have listed below some examples of our work on these levels over the last year. It also highlights how so many of our members have contributed to the impact the Forum has.

1. Awareness raising

Raising awareness amongst mainstream support groups and front line staff : Our thanks to

- Liliane (Mamas Rise Up) who delivered awareness raising sessions to Victim Support Volunteers and to the staff of Gateshead Voluntary Organisations Council about the asylum process, barriers, skills and the reality of living in the UK as a refugee.
- Richard (DASUK) who delivered awareness raising to Cleveland Police.
- Shafia (Durrimaknun) who delivered sessions to staff of Next Step and students of social work at Sunderland University

Raising public awareness about refugees as an 'asset' for the region:

Our 'Skilled' project, led by Panganai (4Cs) displayed a exhibition of photos and testimony from members at the Newcastle Arts Centre, Newcastle Central Library and at the Stockton Arts Centre. It demonstrated the range of skills, qualifications, enterprise experience and global knowledge and connections of refugees living in the region, and highlighted the barriers they face in realising their potential to contribute to the region's economy.

Raising awareness amongst public authorities

We were consulted for shaping the new *Integration up North* project, being run by a partnership of local authorities across the northern regions. Its aim is to improve the integration of migrants in local areas by providing training and guidance about migrants to organisations that deliver public services across the North of England

2. Influencing Services

Improving interpreting services used by the NHS: In January, 10 of our members attended the NHS Interpreting and Translation Service Consultation for BME communities, organised by the Local Health Involvement Networks (LINKs). The NHS has since issued a letter clearly stating in detail how the recommendations for an improved service, made by our members, have been included in the new interpreting service specifications.

Increasing the competency of nurses to work with refugees and asylum seekers. In August 2011, 18 of our members took part in a consultation event we organised with Teesside University for NHS Tees. Our members gave evidence and recommendations on 'what makes a good nurse'. As a result, Teesside University have approved a new 5 year training programme for students of nursing which includes recommendations from the consultation process. The new teaching syllabus for nurses, which starts this September, now includes sessions delivered by our members informing the students about the particular health issues of asylum seekers and refugees

Promoting transfer of good practice from specialist employment and enterprise support services to mainstream generalist services. As part of our Skilled Project, 48 of our members took part in workshops with 62 of the regions employment and enterprise focused policy makers and service providers, and representatives of the region's business sector. A guide on the specific and additional barriers facing refugees in the labour market, and on what works (best practice) in service delivery was produced from this, along with recommendations for what needs to be addressed at the level of policy.

3. Challenging Policy

A. Local level: examples

1. Catherine (Dasuk) and Mustafa (Kurdish Community TV) now participate in the Stockton LINK Core Group
2. Silas (Equality Engagement) and Richard, Catherine, Martin, Kudzai, Twala and Sandra (DASUK) have contributed to the Cleveland Police Independent Advisory Group
3. Other members are taking part in a range of local community engagement platforms: examples include the Sunderland East Forum, the Sunderland Business Forum, Middlesbrough and Stockton BME Networks, Victoria regeneration project, Stockton Community First panel

B. Regional level: examples

1. Economic inclusion: Findings and recommendations arising from our Skilled Project activities and its final report, and recognition for it, has directly led to further opportunities to influence:
 - As members of the Regional Board of the North East Strategic Migration Partnership we successfully advocated for Economic Inclusion to be a distinct objective of its Business Plan. The Forum was then invited to Co-Chair a newly created Economic Inclusion sub-group
 - VONNE invited us to write an article on the challenges and opportunities facing the sector in the context of austerity and Big Society for the State of the North East 2012 special edition
 - Contributing evidence to the Northern Economic Futures Commission (an Ippr North initiative)
 - Became a member of the 2 sub-regional 3rd Sector Skills and Employment Focus groups, which interface with NE Local Enterprise Partnership and Tees Valley United.
 - Contributed to the design of the action research project recently funded by VONNE as one of the key Regional Policy and Representation Forum projects for 2012-13. *How can the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector help ensure that social inclusion and equality are embedded in Local Enterprise Partnership activity and thinking?* We will be a core contributor to the project.
 - We are partnering a research project *'The Age of Austerity: its meaning for refugees, asylum seekers and refugees in the North East'* with Durham and Northumbria Universities. Members are giving evidence about the impact of cuts on community activity, on services and on employment
 - The North East Child Poverty Commission has invited us to Chair a regional event examining Child Poverty amongst the region's ethnic minority communities. Busani will be gathering evidence from members for a film to be screened at the event.
2. Equalities focused advocacy:
 - Mamadou (Mano River Union) and Silas (Equality Engagement) led our partnership with Oxfam's national *'Law into Practice'* programme. In September and October 2011 we organised 6 training sessions for our members on understanding the Equality Act 2010 and how it can be used in challenging inequality and discrimination.
 - In March this year, with the Equality & Human Rights Commission, we presented recommendations on how to engage effectively with refugee

communities to the region's 12 local authorities, health, police and fire & rescue representatives who are tasked with implementing the new Public Sector Equality Duty brought in by the Act from January 2012. We continue to organise training for our members from the EHRC on using the PSED, and our supporting members to engage in public authority consultations around equality objectives and closing equalities gaps. This will be a key objective of our work in 2012-12

- We became a member of North East Equality Coalition and in May helped organise the conference *Voice and Support – where now for equality-focused third sector organisations in Tyne and Wear?*, which mapped out the opportunities that exist for the specialist knowledge and expertise within equality-focused VCOs to contribute to the work of mainstream agencies and policy making. We advocated for the need for the equalities sector to work together to produce a unified voice based on a clear evidence base and clear recommendations
 - As a result of the conference, we are now working with the NE Equalities Coalition to organise an event later this year which will bring equalities VCOs together to address the theme of Poverty
3. We made recommendations to the meetings with prospective contractors for the 2012-2015 UKBA COMPASS accommodation contract. As a member of the UKBA North East Partnership Group focused on transition to the new COMPASS contract we continue to make recommendations and raise issues with G4S, and have secured greater transparency of communications between UKBA and their 'clients'.
 4. As a member of the Regional Board of the North East Strategic Migration Partnership we are advocating for an independent cross-sector regional stakeholder partnership that continues the successful elements of NESMP (after the ending of the UKBA grant in June 2012). It would be able to address and influence migration as a regional interest, beyond the more limited business agenda of the UKBA (managing and controlling migration), and ensure that regional specifics and identity are not lost in a super-regional arrangement

C. National level: examples

1. Gaby (ACANE) and Susan (Purple Rose) have worked University teams to support 29 of our members from 15 RCOs to participate in research on *'Race', Crime and Justice in the North East Region'*, a partnership of the Universities of Durham, Northumbria and Teesside. Interim findings were reported in the region's media and the final report submitted to the Ministry of Justice. Susan is now working with Professor Maggie O'Neill to develop further research on the vulnerability of women.
2. We participated in the national Housing and Migration network (led by hact & JRF), contributing our voice to the exploration of *'Place, Populations and inclusion'*. The network's findings were published this June as *'Housing & Migration: a UK Guide to issues and solutions'*
3. We arranged an exchange learning visit with a high level civil servant from the Department for Communities and Local Government in London, and she travelled to Newcastle to meet members ACANE and HAWAR Kurdish Education Group. We were able to advocate for recognition of the unique role of RCOs and the key barriers faced by the community.

4. Elizabeth (New Hope NE) contributed to the Connected Communities project '*Reframing Citizen-State relationships in an age of Austerity: Community Empowerment in England & Scotland*' (a research partnership of Ippr North and 5 English and Scottish Universities) where we presented our concerns that that the Big Society and its Localism agenda could further disadvantage marginalised communities and minority voices from influence on policy making and resource allocation
5. In March and April this year we invited Mike Kaye to deliver campaigning training to our members. Mike is the Advocacy Manager of the national Still Human Still Here campaign to improve asylum decisions, end destitution of asylum seekers and secure health care eligibility. In May 2012 the Forum was accepted as a full member of the national campaign coalition. Our active contribution to this campaign will be a key objective of our work in 2012-13. Silence is leading the campaign for us, with support from documentary film maker Busani. We are also on the national steering group of the Let us Work campaign.
6. We contributed evidence from our Skilled Project to the Refugee Council's Employment Policy Advisor for use at the Department of Work & Pensions' Ethnic Minorities Advisory Group

D. European level:

1. In September 2011, 6 of our Trustees joined a learning visit to the European Parliament and European Commission in Brussels, organised by MEP Fiona Hall, to gain understanding about European level processes of policy development and the role of MEPs. Trustees also met with representatives from ECRE (European Council for Refugees and Exile) to gain understanding about their advocacy at the European level and understand how the Forum could contribute its collective voice to this work. This will be an objective of our work in 2012-13
2. In October 2011 Panganai (4Cs) delivered a workshop at the Eurocities Social Affairs Forum, held in Rotterdam, Holland, using the findings of our Skilled Project to highlight what works in removing barriers to refugee employment and enterprise. The Eurocities theme was *Innovation in active labour market policies*. Newcastle City Council had recommended our Skilled Project as an innovative model.

Work to strengthen the Governance of the Forum

Since the Forum became a Constituted organisation in 2003 and an independent registered charity in 2004, we have grown and evolved. Over the past year, Trustees have considered ways of strengthening the organisation's Governance, strategic leadership and representation to bring it up to date and ensure we incorporate best practice. The Chair and Chief Executive attended several events organised for the 3rd sector to promote best practice in organisational management. With the support of an independent expert from Project North East, Sandy Ogilvie, Trustees then reviewed the Forum's Constitution. Their recommendations for measures to strengthen Governance were presented to the membership at an Emergency General Meeting held in March this year. The membership voted to adopt the recommendations and these are now incorporated in the Constitution and are being implemented. This includes the provision that from the this AGM, a Trustee's term of service will be extended from 1 year to 3 years, This will allow them the time needed to fully contribute to the organisation's strategic planning.

As part of this process, we organised customised Governance Masterclasses for members in June and July this year. 57 representatives from 36 RCOs gained greater understanding on how to be a more effective member and a good Trustee. We are also carrying out a membership review and are very pleased to welcome 22 more RCOs into membership.

Our position in the region

Have we achieved a credible and respected position in the region, meaning our voice is not just heard, but is listened to? Below are comments made by key agencies this year that demonstrate very positive recognition of the work and unique role the Forum is performing.

The RRF provides contact with refugees that would otherwise be difficult. It means we can relate to refugee communities as well as individuals

Meetings with the RRF have been very productive. The RRF's constructive, developmental and non-confrontational approach means we are able to listen and act on migrant concerns

The research team found the RRF the readiest to respond, most efficient and their contribution was the most productive

In recent meetings held around the country the campaign found that meetings in the North East were the best attended, refugees were better prepared, empowered to engage and were eloquent on their own behalf

The RRF has used its resources well to increase understanding within refugee communities about equalities issues, especially discrimination. It has been the best of the equalities networks in the region in bringing members together and in engaging individuals who have ground level experience with the NHS and local authorities. We remark on lead taken by refugees themselves. The RRF has the confidence to challenge and work with public bodies and pushed them to adapt their core services

We can still do more to ensure agencies and policy makers know they can hear the Voice of the community through the Forum. So we are organising a major event on November 8th to inform the region's funders, policy makers and service providers about our issues, our achievements and our offer of partnership working with key agencies. It will also provide the opportunity for RCOs to display information about your work and secure interest and support.

Plans for the Future 2012-13

Finally, we want to tell you about the Forum's plans for the 2012-2013, and the opportunities for you all to get involved. Our work must remain relevant to our whole membership – which includes those who are still waiting for a decision on their asylum case and those who have been refused, as well as those who have status, may be British Citizens, and are looking at what they can contribute to reconstruction in their countries of origin. So we aim to:

1. Continue to support our members to be effective community activists through our Training & Development Programme, as it enters its 3rd of work, including organising specific training and learning exchange opportunities.
2. Develop our website to include campaign web pages and interactive functions and link to dialogue by refugees and asylum seekers across the UK . We will organise training for our members in digital activism tools, and to contribute to online consultation processes increasingly used by policy makers and service providers.
3. Advocate for changes to UK Asylum Policy & Practice by being an active member of the national *Still Human Still Here* campaign coalition. Support the building of a regional campaign coalition to deliver the national campaign tasks in the North East
4. Promote integration through working to close equality gaps experienced in access to services and opportunities, using the lever of the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty, which places specific duties on Public Authorities to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations
5. Advocate for an adequately resourced One Stop Service, delivered by the independent voluntary sector (NERS in our region)
5. Support the emergence of a new post-NESMP migration focused stakeholder structure in the region and contribute the Collective Voice to its work. Work to maintain standards of housing and support being delivered under the COMPASS contract.
6. Promote a responsible and regionally specific migration discourse, which includes recognition of the potential value of global links and technology transfer for economic development in the region and in countries of origin.
7. Contribute to debate on the relationship between UK International Relations and Development policy and the promotion of peace, security, and social and economic development, and Social Justice in countries of origin
8. Contribute our Collective Voice to efforts to protect International and European Asylum and Human Rights conventions and standards for reception and support, which are set at the European level.

We are very grateful for the support of our Funders, The Millfield House Foundation, Northern Rock Foundation, and The Big Lottery Fund, who enable us to deliver this work.

On behalf of all Trustees we sincerely thank our members for contributing their time, their ideas and their expert knowledge. Without an engaged and energetic membership, the Forum could not achieve this impact and we would not be fulfilling the vision of those who founded the organisation over a decade ago.