



REGIONAL REFUGEE FORUM
The Collective Voice Of The Region's Refugee Community

Registered Charity no. 1109815



➤ The Contribution of Refugees living in the North East ◀

MAKING THE GLOBAL LOCAL: LOCAL ACTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Victims. Scroungers. Recipients of aid... Just some of the words commonly employed in the media and public awareness to describe refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Central to this blanket depiction is the view that refugees and asylum seekers have little to contribute regionally, nationally and internationally. That is not true.

At the Regional Refugee Forum North East we know that the refugee community has a valuable role to play both locally and globally. Right here in the North East of England, committed individuals, forced into exile and faced with difficulties unique to being a refugee, prove themselves to be neither passive nor disengaged from development issues affecting their countries of origin.

Here you will read about just some examples of how refugees and asylum seekers are not only contributing to society in the North East, but also creating and driving positive change across the world. Some are individuals, some collectives. All the stories here are of enterprise and dedication. Most importantly, they are not unique.

Refugees of all nationalities are making a difference through local action. We talk about Africa and Africans in this document only for brevity.

The Forum's membership consists entirely of refugee-led community organisations



THE EVIDENCE FROM THE COMMUNITY.

MAINTAINING THE DEBATE

"This resource strengthens the voice of the African refugee community by enabling them to push for positive change." Verron Munda, Editor, *Planète Afrique*

➤ **Meet Verron Munda.** Verron is a refugee from DR Congo and founder of the Sunderland Great Lakes Community organisation. He's also a professional journalist who now works within the stability of UK society to produce *Planète Afrique*, a monthly magazine for French-speaking Africans.

"With the UK Government's introduction of their dispersal policy in April 2000, Africans became one of the newest refugee communities to arrive in the North East." says Verron.

"*Planète Afrique* is a means of supporting the unique needs of dispersed French-speaking Africans. It gives them information about the social and political situation in Africa, and Europe. It means that although these people are now living in the UK, they still receive the information and awareness

➤ To find out more about *Planète Afrique* contact Verron Munda (Editor, *Planète Afrique*):

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www.planeteafrique.info



of developing issues concerning Africa. This resource strengthens the voice of the refugee community by enabling them to push for positive change."

MAKING THE GLOBAL LOCAL: LOCAL ACTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

CAMPAIGNING FOR CHANGE

"Refugees should have a role to play in developing policy that affects their country of origin. And they are uniquely placed to contribute to the delivery of services and aid." Konomo Fogbia, Congolese Advocacy Network

➤ **Meet Konomo Fogbia.** Konomo came to the UK from DR Congo. He shares with other Congolese refugees, a personal and deep understanding of the political, social and economic problems facing the country: An estimated 4 million people have died since 1998, in what has been described as the widest interstate war in modern African history.

Konomo is a member of the apolitical group, the Congolese Advocacy Network (CAN). This recently established group is committed to playing a role in implementing the United Nations':

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and
- Millennium Development Goals, (such as reducing child deaths, securing access to education, and developing women's rights.)

"Gathering evidence from the refugee community is central to CAN's work," says Konomo. "There are people living in this region who know from experience about the complex problems facing DR Congo. Because they have lived with, or seen for themselves, for example, the growth of HIV/Aids, they know of the impact this suffering has on the social and economic climate in the country.

Refugees know what works and what doesn't. They can find innovative solutions because of their intimate understanding of the problem. The value of the voice of refugees in building policy and shaping practice can't be over-stated."

It is clear that solutions and models that work in the UK may not appropriately redress the situation in DR Congo. Through consultation with Britain's Congolese community, CAN has learned that refugees have much knowledge to contribute. Importantly, CAN is a mechanism by which the collective voice can be gathered. But then what do you do with that wealth of evidence?

➤ Find out more about the Congolese Advocacy Network online at www.refugeevoices.org.uk

If you are interested and want to get involved, please contact Konomo Fogbia at congo-lesse_advocacy@yahoo.co.uk or tel. 079 511 92403

Well, CAN's volunteer members recognised that the most important aspect of the group's work is to open and encourage routes for dialogue between Congolese in the UK, and those in British Parliament, NGOs and the international community. So that is just what they set out to do.

"We want to make sure that the voice of Congolese refugees is heard by policy-makers and

CAN consists entirely of Congolese volunteers from the refugee community:

To help in identifying solutions to promote a better future for the people of DR Congo, by advocating for structures and mechanisms that will promote civil society, human rights, equality, good governance and sustainable development through progress towards achieving the United Nation's stated Millennium Development Goals

To raise awareness about the situation in DR Congo and the needs of its people, to promote understanding of the impact of war on communities, upon infrastructures of education and health, and in particular on the women and children, in order to build up a network of support and influence so that others may add their efforts to promoting peace, stability and reconstruction in the country

To promote and develop links of friendship and learning between local communities in the UK and local communities in DR Congo to reduce feelings of social isolation within DR Congo and encourage mutual understandings and learning between communities and between young people and children in particular.

politicians with the power to influence change." explains Konomo.

"I participated in intensive human rights training, which gave me ideas and the expertise to identify and target pressure points in the media and government. Myself and the other members of CAN did a lot of research before carefully planning our strategy.

Once we were sure who the key players were, we began raising our profile, making sure they knew about our group and its objectives. For example, we sent out letters to the Prime Minister and MPs who sit on related committees. The Commission for Africa consulted with us. The secretary of International Development has asked us to submit a written question to his office, and we've also met the Co-ordinator and Policy Director from the All Party Parliament Group on the Great Lakes Region, where we discussed CAN's objectives. In focussed discussions with the Congolese Diaspora in the North East, we've produced a report surmising our collective analysis of the current political situation in DR Congo, which we've circulated.

Our next challenge is to work with the NGOs operating in DR Congo to help them deliver the aid so needed by the Congolese. Already we've made links with several key agencies, and we're looking forward to exploring how CAN may help further the work they do."

MAKING THE GLOBAL LOCAL: LOCAL ACTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

GIVING CHARITABLE AID

“Local people in the North East can help us make the really difference between life or death for people in incapacitated areas like Africa.” Dr Mohamed Nasreldin, the Sudan Water Grant for Incapacitated Areas

➤ **Meet Dr Mohamed Nasreldin.** Mohamed came to the UK from the one of the most incapacitated parts of the African continent, the civil war-torn country of Sudan. But Mohamed knows that the biggest killer in Sudan is not war, but water.

Here in the UK we take access to water for granted. We also take for granted that the water we drink is safe. But in Sudan even where water is available, it may be so dirty that to drink it could kill you. Across the world, 15,000 people die every day from drinking water contaminated with a cocktail of water-borne diseases such as Cholera and Bilharzia.

A small group of Sudanese doctors, now living in



the UK, recognised and embraced their responsibility to the welfare of those they'd left behind in Africa. And so they set up the Sudan Water Grant for Incapacitated Areas (SUWGIA). This registered charity is exclusively dedicated to providing access to clean, safe water in the world's poorest countries, beginning with Sudan. Currently entirely funded by the trustees (Mohamed and his circle of friends), already SUWGIA has built life-giving wells for four Sudanese villages.

“As a Sudanese refugee in the UK, I do have access to clean water. But when I remember the appalling conditions faced by many Sudanese villagers I know that I must do what I can to help.

SUWGIA's trustees are all Sudanese,” says Mohamed, “and we have all visited some of the poorest of Sudan's villages, and seen for ourselves the extent of this suffering.

It is completely unacceptable that any community should be without even the basic requirements for human life. The money raised by SUWGIA on behalf of such communities pays for equipment and labour, to build wells. And because we know Sudan, and we're a small organisation, we source all contractors locally. Not only does this provide work and income for Sudanese people, it also means that the money we have is used as effectively as possible. And it's not just the one village that benefits: these wells provide a source of clean, safe water that is used by people in neighbouring villages too.

We believe no community should be without access to clean water. That's why we want to expand the charity's work to build more wells in other parts of the world. Local people in the North East can help us make the really difference between life or death for people in incapacitated areas.”

➤ BRING LIFE TO SUDAN

For the price of a pint you can help give life to the world's poorest people. Your donation really will be the difference between health or hepatitis. Today is your day to save someone today from drought, disease and death. To donate securely online, click onto www.suwgia.com




SUWGIA
SUDAN WATER GRANT FOR INCAPACITATED AREAS

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CONTRIBUTING TO INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

"I recognised that the enterprising spirit of African refugees can benefit themselves, their families, their local community and also communities in Africa."

Kamara Ousmane, Founder of Sunderland African Association



➤ *African refugees learn about importing and exporting with HM Customs and Excise*

➤ **Meet Kamara Ousmane.** Kamara is from the Côte d'Ivoire. He brought with him to the UK a deep understanding of the developmental issues facing those he'd left behind. And he has a determination to do play his part in helping both refugees in the UK, and those still living in Africa.

"There are many refugees interested in starting up their own business in the UK," says Kamara. "For my community (Africans living in Sunderland), I'd set up training from Community Enterprise, and HM Customs and Excise delivered sessions on importing and exporting." I recognised that the enterprising spirit of African refugees can benefit themselves, their families, their local community and also communities in Africa itself. My idea is to create business opportunities for the refugee community in exporting goods to Africa. The goods exported would be things which are difficult to get in Africa and necessary to the development of communities there. For example, exporting computers would open up new communication links for African communities, give people the opportunity to learn how to use computers, and improve their education and chances of getting a good job."

Refugee entrepreneurs are also opening shops here in the North East, importing goods from Africa which cannot be found in this region, for example specialty food and clothing. This provides wider markets for producers back in Africa, and helps families set up new export businesses, all helping generate income on the continent too.

REMEMBER!

The North East is now home to people from over 25 African nations. We know you could think of many innovative ways of working in partnership with them. These are just some ideas:

- Invite them to speak about their experiences, knowledge, and countries of origin at your action / discussion circles for greater awareness and understanding
- Work with Africans to deliver workshops in schools, colleges and community centres, giving more people an opportunity to experience diversity first-hand
- Work with them on aid initiatives, helping to raise charitable aid
- Support small business start up, for example through mentoring in British business systems
- Help them to orientate themselves in British institutions, systems and culture so that they can achieve their full potential to deliver their work
- Create links of friendship between communities and schools here in this region and in Africa
- Promote creative thinking by providing opportunities for discussion around different perspectives of, and experiences relating to, international law, human rights, political and administrative institutions, trade etc.



MAKING THE GLOBAL LOCAL: LOCAL ACTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

EXPERIENCING THE GLOBAL LOCALLY: RAISING AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING THROUGH ARTS & CULTURE

*"L'Afrique 'a Newcastle is proud to be supporting artists and craftspeople from the continent."
Manoute Seri, L'Afrique a Newcastle*

➤ **Meet Hilaire Agnama**, from Togo. Along fellow Togolese Alfred Mensah, Oumarou Rassidou, and Ezekiel Williams from Sierra Leone, he set up the Karibu (which means 'welcome') Project. The founders pooled their backgrounds in music, journalism, writing, ceramic art and African Studies and developed a creative arts programme promoting collaboration and dialogue between people of all ages and from different cultural backgrounds, perspectives and experiences. The Karibu Project creates new work which explores, challenges, transforms and contributes to life in the UK. Their recent 'Living History' project with the Teesside Archives gathers oral histories from the African community here, recording



➤ **Hilaire Agnama, Karibu Project**

their memories, thoughts, hopes, fears and experiences of relocating their lives here, to be used as a resource for understanding for current and future generations. Hilaire says, "Our ideologies reflect the heritage of different societies, beliefs, traditions and cultures. Thus, as the world keeps unfolding, we are bound to face challenges while migrating from one society to another". **Contact hilaire_seguro@yahoo.com to find out more about the Karibu Project**

➤ **Meet Michel Mbayabo and Dominic Tshaba** from DR Congo. Arriving in Gateshead they recognised the need to be pro-active in organising a way to bridge the gap in understanding about Africa, its peoples, history, cultures and current situation, and to help the new African community to obtain the skills necessary for their future livelihood. Establishing GAFRICOM (the Gateshead African Community) was their response, and their pioneering work through churches, schools and community centres has been

recognised by two Diversity awards and Community Champions. With professional backgrounds in teaching and marketing, together they have used their skills to deliver workshops on mask and costume making, story telling, drama and music to over 20 schools across Tyneside.

For more information on Michel and Dominic's work see their website www.gafricom.co.uk

➤ **Meet Manoute Seri**, a musician and broadcaster from Cote D'Ivoire. He is co-founder of the annual L'Afrique a Newcastle Festival, now in its 3rd year and the biggest celebration of African music, arts and culture in the region, with a range of events for all the community to join in. "The Festival runs for a week this year" says Manoute. "We have everything from drumming, dance and arts workshops, to street carnival, to film and debate, all involving African artists now living in this region. The Festival focuses on the capacity of music and arts to create a deeper understanding of Africa within the North East. We've also got some of the biggest stars of African music playing at the Sage Gateshead this year - Cameroon's greatest contemporary star, Petit Pays, and DR Congo's rising star Lokua Kanza".

For more information on this year's Festival, which takes place 19th - 24th Sept, see www.lafriqueanewcastle.com



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EDUCATING CHILDREN

“Understanding Tigrinya will strengthen the confidence of Eritrean young people: so that they can add their voice to the collective push for change in Africa.” Shushan Zeru, the North East Eritrean Community Association

► **Meet Shushan Zeru.** An Eritrean now living in the North East, Shushan is an active member of the North East Eritrean Community Association. With other members of this valuable community group, Shushan found that her work with the Eritrean refugee community highlighted the decay of one of Eritrea’s native languages amongst its children and young people.

“Over 5 million people speak Tigrinya,” says Shushan. “Alongside Arabic, it is the working language of Eritrea. But a lot of Eritrean young people, since they now live in the UK, have lost their knowledge of our language, or perhaps never learned it at all.

We were encouraging parents to speak in Tigrinya to their children, but soon realised that a more formal approach was needed. We had the idea of setting up regular teaching sessions, to educate children and young people up to the age of 19 in speaking and writing Tigrinya. This gives young people a deeper knowledge of their cultural heritage, and also opens up the communication lines between young people and the older generation, and, of course, Eritreans still living in Eritrea. We’re in the process of applying for funding for this project, but if we get the money I know understanding Tigrinya will strengthen the confidence of Eritrean young people: so that they can add their voice to the collective push for change in Africa.”



► *Fashion show of traditional Eritrean robes*

The North East Eritrean Community Association also seeks to educate local children about life in Eritrea. One example of this is their work with Norham Community Technology College on its Eritrean Project. This fundraising project engages children and the local community in the developmental issues facing Eritrea, as they strive to raise much needed money to finance the construction of two school classrooms and a well for a village in the south of the country. Ten students will observe the reality of Eritrea first-hand this October 2005, in a planned visit to the village.

To support fundraising activities, and help prepare the students for their trip to Africa, Shushan and other representatives from the Eritrean Diaspora living in the North East held a workshop for the pupils of Norham. This event showcased traditional clothing and crafts of Eritrea, and also introduced the students to the customs of the Eritreans (such as the coffee-preparing ceremony).

Engaging the hearts and minds of students through education, and promoting diversity at a local level, therefore has a local and global impact. Here we see how such fundraising, educational and awareness raising activities serve to advance the education for one Eritrean village, as well as enriching British and Eritrean-refugee children.



► *An Eritrean dances in customary dress*

MAKING THE GLOBAL LOCAL: LOCAL ACTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

OUR CONCLUSIONS

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Refugees from across the continent of Africa who have found a home in the North East are taking action at a local level to promote sustainable development in their countries of origin through:

Exchange of ideas: adding their voice of expertise in debate

About the situation in their countries and potential solutions, so that those influencing development policy can make more informed decisions on effective ways to resolve conflict and secure peace, effective administration, social justice, accountability and reconstruction, which are the foundations for any sustainable future development.

Charitable aid

For projects which provide access to basic resources to improve the quality of life and access to opportunities in their country of origin, again the foundations of sustainable development.

Remittances home

Sent to sustain families without access to income generation, health care, or education, in particular where infrastructures have been destroyed as a result of conflict and its consequences. Independent livelihoods and sustainable development can be blocked unless people can finish their education, invest in reconstruction and business start up, or have treatment for preventable diseases.

International trade

Through business start up here, importing produce from their countries of origin thereby creating new markets and income generation there, whilst also contributing to the growth of this region's economy or by exporting items that, because they are hard to access in countries of origin, hold back development there.

Promoting awareness, understanding

At first hand of the historical, political, social and economic issues facing their countries and people, and of the rich diversity in cultures, arts and music of the continent. People within this region can better understand the causes and consequences of development challenges for individuals, families and communities, and give their support to development efforts, such as fair trade.

Maintaining communication, heritage and promoting reconciliation

To enable their families to return to their countries of origin and 'fit in', should they be able to or wish to, through maintaining their language, culture, and knowledge of structures and current affairs. New skills and new ideas on alternative structures and systems acquired in this region can be applied to the benefit of the whole community there. And communities from either side of conflicts are working together to promote reconciliation so that they and the next generation can live in peace together.

Contributing to social, cultural and economic development in the North East

Through enriching the diversity of the region, new business start up, international links, contributing their existing skills and professional expertise (for example those trained in medicine), providing access to a range of new goods here, and counteracting population loss from this region.

In addition, refugee-led community organisations are playing a unique and active role in promoting the settlement and integration of their communities so that they can contribute to and participate in the social, economic and cultural life of this region on an equal basis, as members of the whole community. From this basis they are able to develop this range of initiatives to assist development in their countries of origin.

**Gaby Kitoko, Regional Refugee Forum
Executive Committee**



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ABOUT THE FORUM

The Regional Refugee Forum North East began life in 2000 as a project within the North of England Refugee Service. The first of its kind in the UK, it was initiated in response to the introduction that year of the Government policy of Dispersal of those seeking asylum in the UK. This brought totally new communities to the region, and their potential contribution to the social, cultural and economic life of the region was recognised, and support given to the unique contribution of active self-organisation by refugees themselves.

Its membership is composed of the North East region's refugee-led community organisations. Their representatives work together to produce the collective voice of the region's refugees, by identifying problems and proposing effective solutions, in order to influence policy and practice around settlement, integration, community cohesion, regeneration, inclusion and diversity. They also participate in training and learning exchange visits to develop the capacity of the member organisations and bring fresh ideas to the region. The Forum became a fully independent charitable organisation in 2004, and became a registered charity in 2005. It is managed by an Executive Committee elected by the membership, and employs two staff.



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