

Unit 4

What are RCOs?

Understanding the characteristics of refugee community organisations

What will this unit help you do and why?

What?

This unit will help you:

- identify refugee community organisations (RCOs)
- understand the different ways RCOs may organise
- consider some common challenges faced by RCOs and by the people who work with them
- learn about some practical approaches to these challenges.

Why?

- It is helpful to understand and appreciate how RCOs are currently organised before you suggest new ways of organising.
- People you approach for funding or resources may want to know what is different about RCOs.
- You will want to avoid common mistakes and misconceptions about RCOs.

Example

‘How would I typify the RCOs round here? People just don’t realise what they are getting on with. They work at weekends, and often fit in large programmes of voluntary work between jobs. You’d be amazed if I took you to see the activity at the local community centre on a Saturday – refugees busy all day doing one thing or another. Many RCOs are trying to provide advice and support, often to destitute people. They get very tired, but they feel that if they don’t do it, nobody else will.’

Key issues

Definition of an RCO

There is no hard and fast definition of a **refugee community organisation** (RCO). Usually, we describe an RCO as an organisation run by refugees and for them, but it is worth pointing out some other features.

- While the organisation will **represent and involve** refugees, membership and leadership may involve people who, although from the same community, are not refugees themselves, but other migrants, British nationals from that background, or the children of refugees.
- The organisation may have a **general remit** to support a particular community (for example, the Anytown Eritrean Community). Or the organisation may be for a **specific purpose or group** within a specific community (for example, Anytown Dynamos FC – a refugee football team and club; or the Anytown Liberian Women’s Organisation).
- Occasionally RCOs cover **several different nationalities or ethnic groups**. For example, refugee women’s groups (such as Women Asylum Seekers Together, in Manchester and London) have formed across nationalities to campaign on issues of common interest.
- In one local area there may be **several different RCOs representing what looks to an outsider like one community**. (See Unit 2 for more information on this.) Reasons for this include the following:
 - There may be ethnic divides that are not apparent to outsiders – for example, Somali Bravanese, Iraqi Kurds or Chilean Mapuches may organise themselves separately from other community groups from the same country.
 - Groups may choose to organise separately because they do not feel they have a voice in other organisations – typically women and young people.
 - There may also be religious differences, or separate organisations for secular and religious groups from the same country.
 - There may be political differences. People may have arrived at different times and may also support opposing political positions or different regimes.
 - There may be other deeply felt and historic divides, for example, in different Somali clans (see page 18).
 - Disagreements about how the RCO should develop, personality clashes or disputes may have caused RCOs to split, as may happen with any voluntary or community organisation.

Of course, more than one reason may be involved in divisions, and different people’s versions of what was the cause may vary greatly.

How do RCOs differ from other small voluntary and community organisations?

RCOs often have the same issues as other voluntary and community organisations, but in some respects they are different. For example:

- RCOs, like other organisations, often have multiple focuses. The key difference is that events in their country of origin may affect the staff or volunteers of RCOs and the people they aim to support. While all organisations are affected by the external environment, for an RCO this can have a variety of knock-on effects on the organisation – for example, a change in focus, increased stress levels, and occasionally a fracturing of the organisation.

Example

One CVS reported that it had learnt that the concept of governance had no equivalent in the Somali community, the predominant refugee group in their area. As a result, they needed to explain that it is a shorthand term to cover the ways in which an organisation plans, manages itself and provides accountability, but they also had to provide a metaphor to explain it. They therefore explained that, when we look at ‘governance’, we are effectively checking it to see that its machinery works properly.

- RCOs may have to deal with problems that can make their work more difficult and that other organisations may not encounter. The experience for the RCO often reflects that of the refugees who volunteer and run the organisation – for example, they rarely have fixed premises. Destitution and the restrictions on asylum-seekers can be critical and unique issues for them to overcome.
 - In RCOs (as in some other small voluntary organisations), the key members are likely to be juggling other work commitments. This may make it difficult to keep the organisation going.
 - As with all small organisations, there can be a blurring between enterprise and community organisation which reflects the entrepreneurial skills needed to set up a community organisation. RCOs may differ from other small organisations in that they may have a lack of understanding and knowledge of the importance of such distinctions (which, in any case, are getting increasingly difficult to maintain in the UK voluntary sector). See Unit 5 *How do we build a*
- relationship?* for more information on the issues that this may raise.
- There is potentially a difference between how RCOs view their role in the voluntary and community sector and how others view it. A number of CVS workers report that refugee organisations find it particularly challenging to understand the context in which they are working and to establish themselves as part of the voluntary and community sector, and that many in effect work outside ‘the system.’

How do RCOs differ from BME organisations?

There is no easily drawn line between RCOs and other BME (black and minority ethnic) organisations. RCOs are identified separately because they may:

- have unique needs as a result of forced exile (for example, mental health needs due to bereavement, torture or rape)
- be newer
- represent less established communities (although this is not always the case)
- concentrate more on what is happening in the country of origin.

Many RCOs will also:

- know less about services, regulations or options than other community organisations
- be less likely to base themselves on any known UK models of organisational development
- feel that they have fewer entitlements, or be less confident about asking for help, particularly if they come from countries with ‘non-democratic’ regimes or institutions.

Apart from the differences noted above, there is a lot of crossover. For example, many organisations representing Tamils fit both definitions, representing both a long established ‘traditional’ ethnic minority and refugees. Also, a long established RCO may become much more like a ‘traditional’ BME organisation after a while. Some organisations are now using the term BMER (black and minority ethnic and refugees) in order to include refugees within this sector as a specific group.

How are RCOs formed?

Each RCO has its own story about how it was created. Some examples that we collected in the course of the research for this guide show the wide variety of origins of RCOs:

- an organisation set up by a group of women who had formed the women’s peace commission in their home country and wanted to promote the status of women in exile
- football teams set up by a young man who was worried that young people might ‘go astray’ if they had nothing to do
- an organisation set up as a national welfare body by a coalition of political parties representing the opposition in exile in Britain
- a group set up by an individual who realised that there were large numbers of new refugees from her country arriving in town, for whom she was being asked to interpret, and who had nowhere to go and no-one to help them
- a local group set up with help from a London-based established organisation after dispersal of asylum-seekers into the area had started

- an organisation encouraged to form from a group of users of an advice service.

Some RCOs get help from refugee agencies (for example, the Refugee Council, Refugee Action or Praxis), refugee forums, other refugee organisations or local generalist capacity-building agencies such as CVS. Many start with a core group of people who have set up organisations or run voluntary sector organisations – usually non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – or political organisations in their country of origin. Some may, in effect, be UK branches of the organisations they have left behind.

Most RCOs develop or have a membership structure, but some may be formed around a leader or significant individual. Or, someone may simply assume representation of a particular group because that is how things operated in their country of origin. Some RCOs that do have a membership structure may rely on their members for a regular income.

Infrastructure workers are likely to be aware that often the founders of RCOs are highly qualified individuals who may have extensive experience of running an NGO or government department before coming to the UK, or who have relevant experience in the UK. One RCO we interviewed was set up by someone who had retired from his job at the Charity Commission, another by a doctor. Some research into refugees and employment over the last 10 years has suggested that refugees have higher than average educational, skills and qualification levels.⁴ (Refugees find it more difficult to get into the labour market, so it is likely that a large number of people with diverse skills have the time to devote to community organisations. Some of them also recognise this as a useful route for developing their skills and for further integration.)

⁴ See *What Skills, Qualifications and Expectations do Refugees have?* Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees, www.icar.org.uk/?lid=60

What RCOs do

Most RCOs start by acting as:

- informal befriending structures
- organisers of sports or cultural activities
- representatives of their community to local agencies
- providers of ad hoc emergency services such as accommodation and informal advice.

Many go on (usually with some funding) to provide:

- advice services
- interpreting and translating services
- advocacy services
- services for children, especially supplementary schools.

Some (once more secure and funded) may also offer:

- training and employment services
- housing services
- services to support people, and other care services.

Do RCOs promote integration?

Integration is a two-way process and RCOs play a critical role supporting newly-arrived individuals and helping them to orientate themselves and adjust to the UK way of life.

In an academic paper written in 2004, Griffiths, Sidona and Zetter carried out a 'social capital analysis' of refugee community organisations and found that those RCOs which were generally excluded from many networks appeared to be less effective in promoting integration. 'While it is clear that RCOs provide vital welfare services it is not clear

how far they act to promote the long-term integration of refugees, given the increasing short-termism of their activity.' This is also reflected in the comments made by many RCO workers about their feelings of exclusion from the mainstream. However, it should be recognised that the primary aim of RCOs may not be to facilitate integration of their community into the UK population. Instead, they may be more concerned with coming together to support each other and maintain their cultural heritage.

How are they funded?

Initially, RCOs rely on donations, time and effort from members, and fundraising activities, and many remain at this level. Some may seek one-off funding for specific events or projects. Sources of funding may include:

- funds for Refugee Week (in June each year) in some localities
- 'community chest'-type local funding, offered as one-off grants from local authorities
- one-off small grants from larger funders, especially from the Big Lottery Fund
- entrance fees and donations.

Once a need for more consistent services is established, RCOs may seek money for them. This may be found via:

- standard local grant funding for projects such as advice services, supplementary schools or training projects
- sub-contracting with other providers for some services, such as refugee integration services, supporting people, or interpreting and translation services
- direct contracts, for example for training and employment, once the RCO has become more established.

LIOs can effectively support RCOs by using the LIOs' extensive knowledge about funding sources and local sub-contracting arrangements. This can also be the key to ending some of the feelings of exclusion that RCOs report.

RCO case studies

The two case studies below illustrate the way that some RCOs are created, and highlight the different roles they can play in their communities.

Tees Valley Women's Voice

Tees Valley Women's Voice (TVWV) was set up in 2004 by five African women who were concerned about the disadvantages and high levels of isolation that African women were facing within the North East region, and particularly in Stockton. TVWV organised their first event with funding from Neighbourhood Renewal in 2005. Since then, TVWV has expanded and by 2007 had 30 members and a very active multicultural management committee.

TVWV does not currently receive any funding. Instead it relies completely on personal, small donations which are just enough to cover room hire for one Saturday a month. In spite of their limited resources, the organisation provides a range of services including:

- referrals and signposting – with help ranging from identifying voluntary organisations that can help asylum-seekers find solicitors, to signposting to infrastructure organisations and other relevant local services
- encouraging voluntary organisations and solicitors to take on cases of detention, denied support and deportation
- providing phone cards for women while they are in detention
- liaising with education providers to enable access to classes which include English language skills and computing
- accompanying African women on visits to local service providers such as GPs
- organising cultural events.

TVWV has received some infrastructure support. The Refugee Council has helped by putting TVWV in contact with other RCOs providing one-to-one support; enabling them to access training, and helping them to get involved with local initiatives such as the local community carnival. The North of England Refugee Service has also provided them with one-to-one support, and the Regional Refugee Forum North East has signposted them to funders and provided support on funding applications. TVWV hopes to secure funding to enable them to support more African women.

TVWV demonstrates how much small community organisations can, and do, achieve with very limited resources.

The Poor African Refugees Community Association

The Poor African Refugees Community Association (PARCA), formerly known as Peterborough African Refugee Community Association, was the first RCO in Peterborough. It was founded in 2002 by a group of refugees concerned about the lack of support for asylum-seekers dispersed outside London. Support was also received from Peterborough Council for Voluntary Services (PCVS). Since then, PARCA has supported refugees and asylum-seekers and plays an important role in the community. In 2006 it supported 1,072 refugees and asylum-seekers.

PARCA's services, all provided on a voluntary basis, include signposting to sources of advice on immigration and welfare benefits. They also offer training and educational activities.

The UK Driving Licence Education Programme for 17-19 year olds has been particularly successful. Free workshops help young people to understand the UK driving licence and car requirements. The course provides young people with driving lessons, information about driving licence requirements, and help with filling in provisional driving licence application forms.

Other services offered by PARCA focus on employment, health and leisure activities. These include careers advice, help with preparing CVs, and information on HIV/AIDS.

Tips for finding out more about RCOs in your area

- Find out where the RCOs in your area are. (See Unit 3 for more information on how to do this.) Once you have identified the RCOs, treat them as you would treat any other group and consider:
 - what they are currently doing
 - why they have chosen to do that now
 - what they say they might like to do in the future
 - what possibilities they have not considered because they did not know about them
 - how you can help them.
- Many small organisations struggle with understanding basic concepts of the voluntary sector, such as governance. You will need to think very carefully about how to explain these concepts because RCOs are likely to find them daunting, especially if there is no equivalent in their experience or country of origin. This approach will help a lot of organisations, not just RCOs.
- Don't expect all RCOs to be set up by people with formal refugee status. (See Unit 2.)
- If you are concerned that key individuals are not fully representing the interests of an RCO, consider the appropriateness of encouraging involvement from a range of individuals and explain that some sources of support will be forthcoming only if the organisation involves a variety of individuals, in particular at governance level. Sometimes it may also be helpful to spell out the difference between a community entrepreneur and a community organisation, and the implications of going down one route or another.
- Avoid making assumptions about RCOs, and try to consider the 'why' as well as the 'what'. For example, if you find that RCO participants are late for events, be sensitive and receptive to the reasons why. For example, it may be that people have jobs that are negatively labelled in their own communities (for example, early morning cleaning jobs), and which they may be embarrassed about.
- Use your extensive knowledge about sources of funding and about local sub-contracting arrangements as a means of supporting RCOs.