

## Unit 7

# Is a specialist approach needed?

Adapting your capacity-building support to RCOs

### What will this unit help you do and why?

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#### What?

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This unit will help you:

- increase your understanding of the types of specialist advice and support which refugee community organisations (RCOs) may need
- become more aware of the types of interventions which may be relevant to developing the refugee (and also migrant) voluntary sector in your area.

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#### Why?

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- RCOs (like small voluntary organisations in other sectors) have certain characteristics which can require a tailored approach.
- Workers within infrastructure organisations can get frustrated when trying to help RCOs develop along 'traditional' lines.

#### Example

'There's no need to tailor our generalist capacity-building support – there's not really any specialist demand from refugees or refugee groups round here.'

Several CVS interviewed in the course of the research for this guide told us this. However, local refugee forums and refugee groups in their areas often disagreed.

## Key issues

‘We’re used to dealing with the BME sector, so we understand RCO needs.’

CVS worker

### Do RCOs have specific capacity-building needs?

The existence of specialist infrastructure organisations, which exist both at national and local level, reflects the particular developmental needs of the refugee sector. Specialist support includes support delivered by organisations that specialise in working with refugee organisations or support that is delivered by LIOs but adapted to meet specific RCO needs. The specific needs of RCOs which may require a specialist approach include help developing specific services (such as immigration advice), and a flexible approach to communicating what may be unfamiliar terms and concepts, such as governance. Specialist infrastructure organisations provide help and support that is tailored to the specific needs, level of knowledge, and language skills of RCO workers. They also create opportunities for RCOs to offer mutual support, while recognising the particular challenges that refugees may face, such as getting recognition for foreign qualifications.

#### Example

One CVS reported that it had been awarded a specific grant to do up to 10 days’ work on business planning with selected RCOs. Another reported that it regularly schedules in time to ensure that the concepts of needs assessment, impact analysis and coaching work in terms of ‘charitable objectives’, form a major part of their initial work with RCOs.

Many local infrastructure organisation (LIO) workers we interviewed in the course of the research for this guide started by stating that they felt that RCOs had no particular support needs, and that they could be reached and supported in exactly the same way as other small groups. However, after considering the issue further, several LIO workers noted that they could think of a number of factors which argued for a more tailored approach. For example, some came across specific and consistent difficulties when trying to support RCOs in starting up and developing. Others reported a frustration with trying to help RCOs with capacity building – constituting, formulating bids, and developing governance structures – when following a ‘traditional’ UK approach. However, finding ways to identify RCOs’ agendas and attract their interest can be very rewarding.

### Different stages of sectoral development

The characteristics of RCOs are covered in Unit 4. As with any other groups, RCOs will be at different levels of development depending on a variety of factors, including the number of refugees in the area, how long their communities have been here, and the social and political context.

The local RCO sector in a particular area may consist of a number of highly informal and unconstituted groups which deliver a range of activities. However, once refugee communities get established and groups begin to take off, the refugee sector can burgeon, sometimes quite quickly. This is consistent with patterns of development in other sectors (and sub-sectors). In areas where there are many RCOs, an LIO may find itself working with a number of smaller groups, encouraging them to work together and pool resources.

Some LIO and RCO workers report that RCOs are often even less aware than other small organisations of the funding changes which may impact on them. They also find it difficult to join relevant partnerships to deliver on local area agreement priorities, for example. (For more on this, see Unit 5 *How do we build a relationship?*)

### Developing a variety of skills within the refugee community

Sometimes it may be useful to consider organising initiatives or programmes which support **community champions and entrepreneurs**, rather than seeking to help groups establish. One CVS has established a ‘community champions’ project for refugees, coordinated by the refugee forum which is based at the CVS. The project offers training on the relevant social care sectors and key structures and power, develops skills designed to help people gain employment (for example, training in interpreting), and holds events which bring refugee champions together with champions from other communities to exchange ideas and make links across sectors.

Developing volunteer programmes specifically targeted at refugees is a good way to support individuals, who may in turn then participate in more formal community groups. Volunteering can provide a much needed stepping stone to paid employment. However, it can prove difficult for refugees to find placements with employers, who may be mistrustful of the legality and desirability of taking on refugees, even in a volunteer capacity. Various useful and imaginative projects on volunteering for asylum-seekers and refugees have been set up around the UK.

For ideas on projects like these, see *A Part of Society*, published by Tandem (see page 59 for details).

Your LIO may already offer services that can be easily tailored to meet RCO needs. Employment advice and support are good examples of services which can be of interest to RCOs and that would require little tailoring. Some LIOs offer ESOL lessons for a trial period, focusing on conversational English in order to help in interview situations. Other organisations, mainly London-based, provide support on work placements and requalification schemes that is tailored to meet the specialist advice and support needs of refugees. Examples include:

- Timebank, which runs a mentoring project around the country ([www.timetogether.org.uk](http://www.timetogether.org.uk))
- Praxis, which has a variety of courses and support for refugee professionals ([www.praxis.org.uk](http://www.praxis.org.uk))
- the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU), which offers training for advisers working with refugees and asylum-seekers ([www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu))
- the Employability Forum, which focuses on policy in the area of requalification and employment ([www.employabilityforum.co.uk](http://www.employabilityforum.co.uk)).

### Supporting RCOs through your capacity-building work

The notion of capacity-building support can feel like a diversion for many RCOs. In common with other small groups, RCOs may find it hard to grasp the importance of capacity-building work.

#### Example

‘We devised a questionnaire – and took some time to send it out – asking RCOs what kind of capacity-building support they wanted. They really weren’t interested. I had to phone them again and again, and when I got through to some, the conversations I had were very difficult. They couldn’t see the point – they told me they needed support, not to be asked questions all the time.’

This example highlights how the needs of an LIO may not always match up with the needs of the RCOs that they are wishing to support. Communicating clearly with the RCOs (see Unit 8) and ensuring that what you are offering, as a support agency, to RCOs is both what they want and need, will help to get buy-in and overcome barriers.

Unit 5 highlighted some of the issues relating to capacity-building work in more detail and the importance of being aware that RCOs may not appreciate the link between what the LIO is offering and what they wish to achieve. **Explaining about the UK voluntary sector, its history and principles** can be an important step in helping RCOs understand the context within which they are working (see page 35), especially when coupled with a practical approach that emphasises how capacity building can help organisations to achieve their aims.

RCOs can also benefit from briefings which give an **overview of the key structures and public bodies** in the UK. As one CVS worker put it: ‘RCOs need a crash course on structures and power – who governs [the City], who is in charge, what those in charge expect.’ This level of information is less likely to be needed by other sectors whose leaders are likely to be more familiar with the UK system.

You may need to explain concepts or terms such as ‘constitution’ or ‘governance’, which many small organisations find confusing, and which may have no direct translation into the language or indeed culture of the refugee. Any training, information or outreach work usually needs to explain the principles behind these terms (why these things exist), as well as explaining what they are. RCOs are likely to need to know:

- Why do we have voluntary boards or management committees?
- Why is governance such an important issue for the voluntary sector?
- What does a board do that a staff team cannot do?
- What are the basic rules around being part of a board? (For example, not being a paid member of staff, taking collective decisions, and quorums.)
- Why do these rules exist?

If RCOs have difficulty understanding the terminology – for example, the concept of ‘governance’ – you may need to review the way you explain them. Thinking about how to explain key terms to an RCO may also have a beneficial knock-on effect for working with other small groups, some of whom also struggle with these concepts and terms. It is also very important to appreciate that many of these concepts are culture-specific to the UK and that other cultures may have quite different ways of achieving the same purposes.

### Is there a need for specialist knowledge and expertise?

**RCOs commonly work on specific issues** and try to run similar types of projects. They therefore need certain types of expertise and knowledge about these areas – for example, how to organise volunteer-run support and advice services, how to set up advice services which can attract funding, or how to work with homelessness and destitution. Your LIO may already have expertise in these areas. If it does not, other specialist organisations may be able to help. For example, the Refugee Council and Refugee Action can offer lots of expert information about destitution and local initiatives on this issue.

Often the core activity of RCOs is **advice giving** about asylum and immigration. RCOs should know that they need to comply with the regulations of the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) on advice giving (see [www.oisc.gov.uk](http://www.oisc.gov.uk)). The OISC offers a supportive approach to RCOs but organisations should be aware that failure to comply with the regulations may result in legal action. The OISC runs a lot of free training for OISC-regulated not-for-profit organisations and their advisers, and for those not-for-profit organisations whose applications are under consideration. It also produces many free leaflets, and an OISC representative may even be able to attend an event to explain what the OISC does and how organisations can register with them. RCOs will need to obtain specialist help and support to make sure they are giving their users support within the strict regulations, and that they are not daunted by the regulations.

### Should RCOs be encouraged to formalise and expand?

RCOs are often unconstituted, and in many cases they are likely to remain so for a while and not wish to expand. Trying to embark on a path of charity registration may not be in keeping with the RCOs' priorities. This poses a strategic question for an LIO as it may be geared up to helping groups progress along a traditional development path, but may not be able to make provision for (nor have funding for) servicing and supporting groups which are likely to remain small and unconstituted. Considering these issues will enhance your work with all unconstituted groups.

#### Example

'I don't think we work very well with the small groups we see, including refugee groups, which are not really interested in getting workers or expanding, but just want to deliver an activity. I've raised this [within the CVS] but the services which are being developed are mainly on quality or governance or constitution ... What the small groups need is more advice on how to organise events, hold meetings, raise small sums of money, handle volunteers ... without pressure to develop further if they don't want to.'

'What I find frustrating with RCOs is that they won't pursue the business model ... They need to understand that they have to follow a certain path of development.'

CVS worker

‘We see some people who claim to have an organisation but, when you look into it, it’s just one individual working on their own.’

CVS worker

Other RCOs see expansion as an inevitable step. Some may want to expand because the activities developed by the organisation have proved particularly successful, or the reason for expanding may be in order to follow funding. But opening up services to those beyond their immediate community can raise questions of legitimacy and focus. Dealing with expansion is tricky, and discussing the issues with the RCO can be a real help.

### Example

One RCO running a Saturday school for Tamils in its community opened its Saturday school to non-Tamils because of demand from other parents who saw the Tamil children achieve more in school.

Another issue that may need to be tackled is how to deal with proliferation of groups – a phenomenon in areas where there is a rapidly expanding population of newly arrived refugees or migrants, and many different RCOs are set up.

### Example

‘We have a number of Iraqi organisations in the area. This has given rise to some difficulties, and we have had to pull groups together to discuss how best to proceed. The important thing is to be honest, and also to be robust with groups – there is limited public funding, and they need to justify their existence to receive it. Our capacity-building worker is originally from Iraq and this helps him be quite up front and challenging in terms of what he says.’

One refugee forum has recently had success with dealing with this proliferation, prompted by the refusal of a funder to continue to fund several groups working with the Somali community within the same area. The refugee forum worked with five groups, explaining the advantages of formulating joint bids and not duplicating services, and facilitating dialogue and planning sessions. These groups worked together and have led the way for other emerging groups in their area to follow suit and plan services alongside what already exists.

### Tips for meeting specialist support needs

- Do briefings for RCOs on the context of the voluntary and community sector in the UK, of funding, of public bodies and accountability. Integrate such briefings into outreach work and relate them to the aims and objectives RCOs wish to achieve.
- Consider offering services to individuals as well as groups – help with jobsearch, support to become a community champion, or volunteering programmes.
- Take it slowly. Don't rush a small group to constitute before they have proved their track record on an activity, and have worked out whether (and why) they wish to do so.
- If an RCO wishes to expand, don't be afraid to ask them why it wishes to do so. There needs to be a good reason for this, and they need to know they can do what they say they can do.
- Bring RCOs together on commissioning and funding opportunities to discuss partnership working. Consider acting as the accountable body for a project if the opportunity arises.
- Carry out a review to find out if your capacity-building workers are keeping up to date on the areas of work undertaken by RCOs in your area. Remember that rapid changes can and do occur. For example, do relevant LIO staff know about the regulations on advice provision? Make sure you are fully aware of the rules and regulations around setting up different types of services. This applies particularly to advice services.
- Find out what other support agencies are doing, particularly local RCO forums and agencies specialising in work with refugees. You may encounter them by establishing contact with your local multi-agency forum on refugees or through your ChangeUp forum.
- When 'failures' occur, analyse them to facilitate learning. Refugees are normally keen to learn. Specialist providers (such as the Refugee Council) advocate having sessions to help analyse failures in particular. This is often a good prompt to get groups to understand principles and improve practice for the future. Providing support in overcoming setbacks also demonstrates the LIO's long-term commitment towards helping RCOs to achieve their aims.