

Better  
Housing  
Briefing

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**Harnessing the  
talents of  
marginalised  
communities**

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A Race Equality Foundation  
Briefing Paper

February 2010

## Key messages

- 1 Marginalised groups become visible, credible and respected partners when their role is formally recognised by housing providers
- 2 Community empowerment needs to be part of a wider transformation agenda, taking greater account of what communities have to offer
- 3 Recognition criteria establish an ongoing relationship from one of occasional consultation to one of long-term participation
- 4 Developing long-term participation ensures that marginalised groups play a part in social sustainability by building understanding and links at neighbourhood level.

## Introduction

This briefing paper reflects on the role of community development in the context of some of the most marginalised groups in society – refugee community organisations (RCOs) – through the eyes of the *Accommodate* Refugee Housing Partnership Project (Jones and Mullins, 2009).

The *Accommodate* Refugee Housing Partnership Project (*Accommodate*), 2004–2007, was developed by the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact). *Accommodate* involved local authorities and housing providers working in partnership with RCOs to improve housing and integration outcomes (Jones and Mullins, 2009). Local authority involvement gave the process legitimacy and acknowledged the role and contribution of RCOs. Hact pioneers housing solutions for those on the margins of society and provided community development support for RCOs throughout the project. The organisation played an external community development role that took much of the hard work, usually associated with multi-agency partnership working, out of the process.

Hact set up the project in response to a need it had identified for local political will and strong local leadership to counter myths about refugees and newcomers. This was anticipated by hact's choice of housing partners, supporting those with the vision to engage and reach out to potential RCOs.

*Accommodate* revealed barriers that were less obvious than the more usual ones of language and cultural difference. The first phase of the project offered seed-funding to partnerships, enabling them to demonstrate their commitment and ability to deliver. At the same time, hact identified a confidence-building strategy to ensure that RCOs had a say in setting the agenda as well as a seat at the table. Throughout the project, hact created space for learning, bringing the partnerships together in 'away days' and national workshops in order to share the 'bigger picture' and keep the momentum going (Jones and Mullins, 2009). One of the underlying purposes was to achieve RCO empowerment, and hact took a hands-on approach to capacity building to this end. This paper draws on the effect that hact's role had in the long term in improving refugee access to housing services and in the development of stable relationships between housing partners and newly emerging refugee communities.

### 1 The emerging role of refugee community organisations

Most refugee communities establish self-determining RCOs, which are often unfunded or are reliant on short-term funding. These groups of refugee people seeking asylum are coordinated around a particular identity, related to ethnicity, culture or country of origin, and offer members a place of safety and a cultural touchstone

(D'Onofrio and Munk, 2004; Jones, 2007). Increasingly, some go beyond advice and guidance to provide training and employment, housing, care services and supplementary schools (Hutton and Lukes, 2008; Perry and El-Hassan, 2008). Patterns of community-based support mirror patterns of migration because need is unformulated, service provision patchy and settlement strategy inconsistent (Zetter and Pearl, 2000). RCOs proliferated in London and the south-east of England, which coincided with the increase in asylum applications during the 1990s, although the national dispersal strategy developed in 2000 from the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, meant that fledgling groups developed across the UK. The Government's National Refugee Integration Strategy (Home Office, 2005) noted the contribution of RCOs to building bridges with 'host' communities, but few partnership initiatives existed to harness the talents of RCOs in the long-term.

### *Marginalised groups as potential partners*

There remains a lack of understanding of refugee self-help groups. They are described as operating 'below the radar', a phrase used to illustrate the consequence of a lack of recognition and non-participation of RCOs inside mainstream networks. Evidence shows that within partnership working, there is little engagement with 'hard-to-reach' groups from communities that are marginalised on the basis of ethnicity, gender, age or disability (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). Changes in housing policy, such as the reconfiguring of small and black and minority ethnic housing associations, makes recognition of and engagement with newly emerging groups all the more urgent. Recent studies show that marginalisation is linked to structural barriers within society; for instance, institutionalised racism and a lack of political will (Carter and El-Hassan, 2003; Carter, 2008).

Although RCOs subsist on the margins of society, this does not necessarily mean that they are 'hard to reach'. Instead, the problem may lie with those who fail to reach them. In comparison with tenants' and residents' associations (TRAs), which housing providers traditionally develop in order to build dialogue, most RCOs are already self-organised and structured, and provide the potential for collective voice. In some regions umbrella organisations and wider networks exist, an example being the Manchester Refugee Support Network. Established RCOs often encompass years of experience of exerting political and social influence in their members' home countries (Lukes, 2009). However, service providers tend to have 'as-needed' contact with RCOs, in the form of occasional consultation, but this offers only 'weak influence' over services and policies: RCOs are rarely engaged in community participation as an ongoing relationship (Amas and Price, 2008, p. 16).

## **A transformative approach to community empowerment**

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The terms community 'engagement', 'participation', 'cohesion' and 'empowerment' are often used interchangeably. Clarification of terms helps identify the engagement message needed to address wider inequalities. The Communities and Local Government's (CLG) Communities in Control strategy describes community engagement as the process whereby service providers 'reach out' to communities in order to create opportunities for the empowerment of those communities (CLG, 2008). Yet the prevailing thinking about refugee people seeking asylum is that they are in need of support and services rather than empowerment (Flint and Robinson, 2008). Studies suggest that community engagement in partnership projects is best developed by ensuring that communities are involved in problem assessment and become part of the solution, particularly as solutions are often found well after a project has finished (Anderson, 1996; Laverack and Wallerstein, 2001).

For many, the purpose of community participation is to achieve community empowerment by a redistribution of social power. The CLG (2008) modernisation drive, at least in terms of its rhetoric, describes community empowerment as active citizenship whereby individuals and communities solve complex problems for themselves. On the other hand, Batliwala (2007) considers community empowerment to be part of a wider transformation, in which there is more equal access to resources, a lasting change in attitudes and better relations between service providers and service users. This description of a transformative approach to participation takes greater account of what communities have to offer than of what they need; that is, it illustrates the asset rather than the deficit model of community

empowerment. The asset model focuses on *'the nature of social injustice and oppression whilst at the same time creating viable alternatives'* (Ledwith, 1997, p. 118).

One important aspect of the debate about community participation and empowerment is the role of community development in driving the process forward. When interviewed about the purpose and role of community development Gary Craig, Professor of Social Justice, commented:

*The problem is that too often community development has simply been seen as a skills-based occupation. The BNP [British National Party] uses community work skills to organise its own constituency to some degree. So without a value base and without a theoretical framework, I think the skills fall down, because they can be used anywhere. That has always been one of the tensions of community development.*

(Craig, quoted in Pitchford and Henderson, 2008, p. 41)

These tensions are clarified by Shaw when she suggests that a choice has to be made between whether community development is intended to act as a mirror and reflect the *'world as it is'* or whether it tries to create a more equal and sustainable alternative: *'the world as it could be'* (Shaw, 2008, p. 34).

### 3 The importance of recognition

Hact's values as an organisation were an important starting point in the process of recognising the potential of RCOs to contribute to housing partnership working and outcomes. Core values include commitment to championing the housing needs of marginalised communities and adopting the role of catalyst for change. Hact's values reflect community development good practice principles, such as social justice, self-determination, participation and collective learning, recently summarised in a review of community development work national occupational standards (PAULO, 2003). Hact's pioneering approach, however, could not be fostered without risk taking. *Accommodate's* instigator, Azim El-Hassan, linked risk taking with trust building:

*It's very important for hact working with marginalised groups to take risks. As long as you want to learn you've got to take risks and if you are working with marginalised groups you want to trust them and work from them.*

(Extract from an *Accommodate* scoping interview with Azim El-Hassan, hact associate, 21 February 2006)

In working with RCOs 'below the radar' since the 1980s, hact developed a grass-roots understanding of their importance to service providers, offering insider knowledge and first-hand experience of refugee housing needs and aspirations. In 1998 hact set up the Refugee Housing, Training and Development Project. The project updated RCO housing advisers with the latest client information and sought to signpost and engage them in mainstream networks. This work meant that hact nurtured the trust of RCOs over time and that RCOs were therefore prepared to take a 'leap of faith' in partnership working in *Accommodate*. Hact was aware of practical constraints: many of the very embryonic groups, particularly in areas of dispersal, were often run from their members' own homes. During *Accommodate*, hact was careful to ensure that people were contacted by telephone and word-of-mouth, because not every RCO had access to electronic means of communication.

Additionally, hact appreciated that there was a 'credibility gap' between what RCOs were able, in principle, to offer to partnership working and what remained unrecognised by some statutory service providers. In the past, established RCOs had sometimes experienced a lack of faith, on the part of service providers, in their abilities. One respondent, interviewed for *Accommodate*, commented: *'We had talks ten years ago with the Local Authority [but have] still not become part of the decision-making strategy.'* Hact ensured that *Accommodate* included local authority partners in order to secure the legitimacy and political will

necessary for policy change at strategic level. Recognition of RCOs was implicit in the process of setting up *Accommodate*, especially in those partnerships where RCOs took the lead. Although Hact did not propose formal recognition criteria, it worked proactively to build trust between RCOs and other partners. Because it was 'independent', Hact was able to ask the difficult questions about the selection of partners and whether they were the most appropriate personnel to fill their respective roles. Trust building developed over time. RCOs' voice in policy making was increasingly validated as other partners 'recognised' the value of their experience and knowledge-rich role. Formal 'recognition' in a community development sense is interesting in that it begins a relationship that can be ended only by organisational dissolution or 'de-recognition'. It also transforms the relationship between the statutory and voluntary sectors from 'as-needed' contact to 'ongoing' contact, opening the way for regular involvement in policy and decision making.

### **Box 1 Recognition criteria: a 'definite deal'**

Hact did not propose formal recognition criteria for *Accommodate*. The criteria listed below, however, are based on our experience of good practice and illustrate recognition criteria that arise from a 'definite deal' – that is, a deal that offers mutual benefits to both housing providers and marginalised communities where there are few accurate statistics and little meaningful intelligence at neighbourhood level. Marginalised groups can act as a 'critical friend' to help improve access and service provision.

- A 'definite deal' between housing providers and their tenants and residents is based on mutual rights and responsibilities.
- Procedures vary, but the deal relies on commitment and trust on both sides.
- Housing providers have a 'duty to involve' their residents, often assisted through dialogue with the collective voice of tenants' and residents' associations.
- In order to be 'recognised', tenants' and residents' associations need to demonstrate that they are inclusive, representative and accountable.
- In return, housing providers offer support, staff time and resources.
- The added value to both partners is the 'legitimacy' that recognition brings, which means that associations can attract resources from external funders to bring benefit to the wider community.

## **Establishing an ongoing relationship**

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There is a tendency for statutory agencies to consult groups such as RCOs, on short-term problems, but they are rarely engaged or supported in devising solutions in the longer term. This can result in disillusionment with participation. In a recent evaluation of community strategies, too much consultation that fails to lead to community engagement has been identified as a barrier to community empowerment (Darlow *et al.*, 2008). Community groups are familiar with agencies that 'parachute in' with a clipboard to ask questions without offering feedback and to identify issues of concern without offering resolutions. Capacity building based on a commitment to social justice and equality takes an approach to teaching and learning that encourages participants to constructively challenge service providers' assumptions, engage in critical dialogue and recognise the connection between local problems and their wider social context (Craig, 2007).

In contrast to short-term consultation, the role of 'critical friend' has been developed. This describes the established relations between tenants' and residents' associations and housing providers that grew out of scrutiny and local authority Best Value Review procedures. It is not an easy relationship for service providers to cultivate, as Ray Jones, Director of Social Services, Wiltshire County Council, admitted when taking part in a Best Value Review conducted by disabled staff:

*It takes a level of mutual trust based on experience over a period of time to get to the position where we can together value a shared commitment to improve policy and practice, and it also takes a willingness to sometimes experience some bruising within the relationships which have been established.*

([Jones, 2001](#), p. ix)

The role of 'critical friend' is based on trust that entails honest feedback and out-of-hours and first-hand intelligence, together with an ability to reframe questions, problems and solutions. In the later stages of *Accommodate*, when asked if they felt they were equal partners, one RCO representative answered: '*now we are because we've got the tools to stand up and put our views across – we feel we can disagree*'. This captured the importance of the trust building that formed a fundamental part of hact's approach to community development throughout the project.

### **Box 2 The five 'Cs' of Best Value to guide the role of 'critical friend'**

*Challenge:* policy against best practice in service delivery.

*Consult:* with users regarding systems and practice.

*Compare:* with costs and good practice elsewhere.

*Compete:* the service against other service delivery.

*Collaborate:* identify other partners to deliver a better service.

(Adapted from [Evans et al., 2002](#), pp. 34–5)

### *The contribution of marginalised groups to social sustainability*

Local authority community strategies operate within a complex institutional environment and a changing policy context with weak links between levels. Recent national evaluations suggest that the treatment of cross-cutting themes such as '*social inclusion, equality and diversity, and sustainability varies considerably across strategies and is an area for development in the future*' ([Darlow et al., 2008](#), p. 7). Hact's role in *Accommodate* revealed a paradoxical process that evolved from its work with RCOs as communities of identity, but resulted in RCOs becoming engaged with the wider community. Hact was committed to developing the partnerships to a strategic level in order to influence policy by encouraging partnerships to engage with RCOs' immediate needs, so that day-to-day practicalities were tackled at the same time as strategic action was taken ([Anderson, 1996](#)). [Hole's \(2009\)](#) report on building communities of trust in the north of England highlights the need, in the first instance, to work with people on issues that concern them.

Intercollaborative strategies to meet the needs and long-term aspirations of newcomer and refugee communities in the UK are limited ([Amas and Price, 2008](#)), but an RCO resource centre – an evolving outcome of *Accommodate* – offered facilities to RCOs from different cultural backgrounds. The RCOs were joined by other newcomer communities representing the needs of economic migrants. Female community leaders began to realise that women, in particular, faced similar barriers to accessing a range of services. An international women's group was formed and, gradually, a common purpose and common issues galvanised activities. Eventually, the group began reaching out into the neighbourhood, connecting with the local school, job centre and health providers. The emergence of the international women's group, sharing space and resources with other newcomer communities, is a key strength of adopting a community development approach to newly emerging black and minority ethnic groups.

*'I don't think you can actually establish a base for progress, creativity and entrepreneurship unless you have the cultural identity. I think you find that the way to develop [newcomer community groups] and to integrate them is to give them a sense of separateness and identity. ... You can actually get people involved, it's a sort of empowering process that you empower people through their identity rather than by dispersing them.'*

(*Accommodate* respondent)

## Conclusion

Marginalised groups, such as RCOs, are not necessarily hard to reach. Because they are involved in addressing gaps in services, they are often self-motivated and well organised. What is often missing is the role of an 'independent' partner with commitment, skills and a track record of trust building to help partnerships realise statutory recognition of their worth (Jones, forthcoming). Community development practice with marginalised groups requires a value base that seeks to transform negative attitudes, realign resource distribution and build better, stable relationships with newly emerging, as well as with more established, black and minority ethnic groups. Working alongside marginalised groups in this way, and encouraging them to act as a 'critical friend', is an established method of addressing their needs and aspirations in service provision. Recognition of the value of engaging with groups that operate 'below the radar' is the first step in building trust. Over time, shared trust between service provider and marginalised communities can create a mutually beneficial and ongoing relationship. Experience of *Accommodate* demonstrated that working with communities of identity does not lead to segregation; rather, it leads to empowering them to help build social sustainability at neighbourhood level.

## Resources

### Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact)

Hact, the housing action charity, works to improve the housing conditions of poor and marginalised people. Its projects aim to deliver lasting change by harnessing the energies and enthusiasm of local people, housing providers and other organisations. 'Communities R Us' (2004–2008) was an inventive programme of three pilots in Manchester, Bolton and Wakefield to enable grass-roots initiatives to ease tensions and increase understanding between established and newcomer communities. Follow the link below for the evaluation report:  
<http://hact.org.uk/communities-r-us/895>

### Information Services for Tenants: Empowerment and Participation (InSTEP)

InSTEP is a national organisation providing information and training services to tenants in social housing. Its purpose is to promote good relations between tenants and their landlords, to inform and empower tenants and to encourage good practice in tenant participation. An information guide, available on the website, explains the importance of recognition criteria when setting up a tenants' and residents' association. It can be downloaded from:  
[www.instepservices.co.uk/files/Info%20Sheets%20TSA/Setting%20up%20a%20TRA%20Dec%202008.pdf](http://www.instepservices.co.uk/files/Info%20Sheets%20TSA/Setting%20up%20a%20TRA%20Dec%202008.pdf)

### Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)

*Users' Best Value: A guide to user involvement good practice in Best Value Reviews* (Evans, C., Carmichael, A. and Members of the Direct Payments Best Value Project Group of Wiltshire & Swindon Users' Network) is a joint publication from the JRF,

Wiltshire & Swindon Users' Network and the University of Bath. It reports on the principles and practices in a Best Value Review carried out in 2002 by disabled staff at Wiltshire County Council to evaluate the accessibility of Wiltshire Social Services. It can be downloaded from:  
[www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/1842631403.pdf](http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/1842631403.pdf)

*More Responsive Public Services? A guide to commissioning migrant and refugee community organisations* (Perry, J. and El-Hassan, A.A., for hact, published in 2008). This guide offers practical examples of how some agencies engaged and worked with migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs) at different stages in the process of commissioning. It can be downloaded from:  
[www.jrf.org.uk/publications/more-responsive-public-services-guide-commissioning-migrant-and-refugee-community-organ](http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/more-responsive-public-services-guide-commissioning-migrant-and-refugee-community-organ)

### Shelter

Shelter is a charity that works to alleviate the stress caused by homelessness and bad housing. It does this by giving advice and advocacy to people in housing need and by campaigning for lasting political change. The web link below explains how to develop recognised tenants', residents' and leaseholders' associations with all types of landlord and managing agents. It explains the rights that residents have to consultation and the wider role of residents associations in improving the local environment and community spirit. Information can be accessed via the link below:  
[http://england.shelter.org.uk/get\\_advice/neighbourhood\\_issues/residents\\_associations#3](http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/neighbourhood_issues/residents_associations#3)

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February 2010

Copy-edited by Fiona Harris 01908 560023  
Graphic design by Artichoke 020 7060 3746  
Printed by Crowes 01603 403349  
**ISBN 978 1 873912 18 8**

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