
Community Empowerment: Refugee Perspectives

The following interviews were made with refugee and migrant community activists in Manchester. They represent people who at the time had been involved in setting up a group under a year old.

Melanie is from Ensemble, an area-based group working with migrants in east Manchester. It is led by parents and mainly women and at the time of the interview had recently established a French-speaking supplementary school open to anyone in the area.

Innocent is from the Congo Support Project. This group was a bit more established, working with a community of some 2-300 people in Manchester and linking with other Congolese groups around the country. At the time of the interview it had recently moved into a community centre in Salford and was broadening the support services it was able to offer with its community; working with destitute asylum seekers, coordinating anti-deportation campaigns, supporting access to services.

Faisal is a part time worker and volunteer from Arlaadi Somali, an established community organisation renting its own premises, running a schools project, supplementary school and busy advice service, employing some part time staff but mainly voluntary.

While all three interviews were conducted with the same core set of questions, the interviewer did make some reminders of experiences that had been left out that he thought to be a useful addition and shed extra light on the work these activists are involved in.

The interviews were undertaken on behalf of the Federation for Community Development Learning (FCDL) as part of a National Empowerment Partnership project. The interviewer was Dhara Thompson. He was known to all three people and they had worked together on a number of occasions over a period of one to three years. Dhara is a freelance community development worker, who had worked with MRSN and the groups as part of FCDL's Improving Reach project during 2007-2008.

Interview 1

Melanie Ngangen, Ensemble (French speaking Black and Minority Ethnic community group)

4th March 2008

What is your understanding of community empowerment?

CLG definition of community empowerment:

"Community empowerment is the giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them."

Community Empowerment is supporting communities to actually build the skills of their own people – particularly the poorer communities. Supporting these people with the skills, knowledge and experiences they need to be able to contribute to the community they live in. In the land of refugees the communities have loads of skills, knowledge and experience but they are just frustrated because they don't know where to go. Their skills are just killed. They need to achieve their potentials. The definition does say what community empowerment is. It says enough.

1. What are some of the main obstacles to community empowerment that you face?

Language barrier – I have been personally frustrated as a nurse, I have lived the situation myself where patients understand me well enough, but some colleagues say they can't understand my English. I think this is about their power over me. Not having English 'on the hand', as a natural thing, you feel frustrated, so many people lack confidence to do things, they don't even know how it makes them low in self-esteem. 'I can't even speak the language!' you feel and people can knock your confidence down, like some of my colleagues at work have done. Also people who knock you down know you don't know the system. They assume your lack of language means you are ignorant. You're not ignorant!

Volunteers – they don't want to volunteer for me, in our group. People in our community can be unsupportive in the work we are doing. They would rather volunteer for Surestart as it is a recognised organisation. I asked a woman to work with me. A few weeks after I saw her asking to volunteer at Surestart.

There is a lack of knowledge about what is going on and how people can change things for themselves. People can be scared of you because they think you are 'there to rip them off' – I'm not even getting paid! Do they know this? I'm a very curious person and I have explored what this is about... a lot of people have been in the system and have not got the help they need, so now they have a lack of trust. If smaller refugee community organisation were better recognised it would be better. I have had similar attitudes from other RCOs, not working with us. We are seen as not powerful, just local! But I've been to Local Area Agreement and Neighbourhood Learning for Deprived Communities (NLDC) meetings and here I haven't seen BME people, they don't go to these meetings to find out what's happening.

Access to mainstream services is another obstacle.

Leadership skills. Refugees don't have people to support them, people are out there crying for help. There should be a better way to reach these people. The support within communities is missing. Certain people set themselves up as representatives – they should be there as role models. There is a lack of role models. Maybe this is because people are selfish?

2. What are your experiences of trying to get over these obstacles? And what's your experience of getting the support you need from existing local infrastructure organisations/voluntary sector?

On language I have networked with NLDC, particularly on the ESOL project. I feel people who teach ESOL should also have experience of learning English themselves. I went on a Train the Trainers course to be able to facilitate some of the sessions I feel my community needs. By being in that situation I know exactly what to tell my people and I feel strong. These people (refugees) are out there but many are after cleaning jobs yet these people should be in better jobs. We need to think about ways to get people from being volunteers into employment.

I have had good experiences with MRSN, Scarman Trust, Diversity & Inclusion, Family Welfare Association, Women from Abroad, Zest, Manchester Council on Community Relations. In terms of statutory organisation, Housing gave us training for our treasurer. There is support from other places, it's a matter of knowing where and how to find it. You people are doing a good job by opening our eyes.

3. What would make a difference to:

A. Internal: develop your own organisation so you feel you can work around your own needs more effectively?

It would help if all the French speaking communities stuck together, to form a sort of network, even national. French is coming on the curriculum (language compulsory from 2008) so there are many in our communities who could benefit as tutors.

Training would make a difference – people want to become ESOL tutors. There needs to be funding to deliver training for volunteers and to train others. ESOL can lead into jobs. Also we need



leadership training. We have started but not finished Can-do coaching (Scarman Trust), which covers communication, time management, very basic things.

B. External: your ability/capacity to engage with others (LSPs, partnerships)

We need support in terms of writing policies. We need development workers in our community who are there employed full time to help us, even part time! It is not easy at the policy level, there is lots of thinking needed to engage at that level and to put your ideas across in a way that gets heard. At the Local Area Agreement meeting, there are a lot of people who when they see us they don't respect us.

4. What proverbs from your culture relate to community togetherness?

'Donnons nous la main pour un future meilleur' – give us a hand for a better future. When you give a helping hand you empower one, two, three – you become stronger.

5. What would help you find common ground with other groups, be less isolated as a group?

I am working with Sophie (Manchester Refugee & Migrants' Forum worker) on social capital ideas. When people feel the commonalities between them they feel very strong. If we link up together and try to understand other problems, our common points, we can join together to do something and to help others – it is not just refugee communities who are suffering, we can help other communities. We should look at this another way because it is old fashioned to talk of refugees as people with problems. 'Hard to reach' is created by those who are supposed to be helping. Have you even tried to reach these 'hard to reach' people? The people who come up with these terms they just sit down, have a coffee and say 'hard to reach' and they get paid loads! I know one woman they took to a café to interview as a refugee – she was a French citizen! They talked with her and wrote a report saying they had reached the 'hard to reach' and 'broken isolation'. I'm not going to say the name of the project – I asked these people for help setting up ESOL. They didn't give us any help, but they said they did in their report!

Lots of refugees are running away from their identities, they hid behind their British citizenship to avoid this. Instead we need to find the positives. How many nurses and teachers are refugees, on good salaries? We need to empower people to think 'I can go there!'

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Interview 2

Faisal Osman, Somali Refugee Community Activist

4th March 2008

What is your understanding of community empowerment?

CLG definition of community empowerment:

“Community empowerment is the giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them.”

The definition looks really good. It's a kind of governmental position, really a big thing. If we talk about refugee communities, having the confidence and skills and power themselves is one of the major barriers. When people come to the UK they feel they can't compete (in terms of language and education) with others in the country – they lack the confidence and can't achieve what they want to achieve. If you have skills already when you arrive here it's easier to integrate if you have the confidence. However, if you come with no skills, and try to skill yourself, there are lots of barriers. Where do you start?

In my country (Somalia) about 80% of people's skills aren't relevant in the UK. People in Somalia come from nomadic areas, they are livestock farmers, they know about animal care and they have one language (not English). People in their late '20s and early '30s who have moved to cities in Somalia, have no proper education or employment skills. In the last 20 years for anyone under 30 years old there has been no experience of work or education, and many are supported by people outside Somalia.

To empower the Somali community will take another 10 to 15 years – you need to get to the stage where you have parents who speak and understand English, and who know the culture in the UK, unlike Somali parents now. We need young people who can put back into the community and who have confidence and skills.

1. What are some of the main obstacles to community empowerment that you face?

Number one is education. There are few adults with an established educational background. Unless there are more adults with an education, or we wait 15 years for the next generation to grow up, things will be difficult. Nearly 60% of the present Somali community arrived since 1999. Less than 10% of them have tried education, ESOL, college, etc. People have got houses, and signed on, but no more has happened. The Jobcentre itself does not encourage you to get an education – New Deal is focused only on jobs, but for jobs you need English! It is a cycle that goes round and does not help. Somali children have high levels of underachievement in schools. This is documented in research that we used to fundraise for our schools project.

Language in itself is a big obstacle. Schools and the Council have found it difficult to help us because of the language issues. They didn't know about some basic issues, for example, a child in class could be getting letters to take back to his parents, threatening to exclude him from school. The boy pretends to translate the letter, but doesn't tell the truth. His parents think he is at school, the boy is pretending to go to school, but is just going out

and being exposed to drugs and gangs. This all starts with parents not understanding what is said in the letters being sent to them.

At Manchester Advice (Council service) Somali people were turning up and they would get no advice or support unless they came with a support person who could talk English. There are about 20,000 Somalis in Manchester, half of them are adults, of whom less than 500 are able to manage themselves with English – that's 97.5% of Somali adults who can't support themselves in English. The other half of the 20,000 are children and they are better with English.

With housing services we have had our biggest problems. People have had problems with basic understanding of letters sent to them, or they get confused into changing utility companies every few months without proof of why. With housing services themselves you can make an appointment, things are not assessed immediately, and it takes one month to get an appointment. The delay and the time spent waiting is stressful for people. Now when the appointment happens, if there is a problem with language a report can not be made so people rely on Arlaadi Somali to support them.

UK culture is an obstacle too. In Somalia nearly everyone is the same religion. Here is lots of different people, languages, religion. It is really difficult to adapt to the life of the hosting country, which isn't one country. It is a multicultural society and it takes time to see how things work. It is very different. In Somalia women didn't do paid work, men and women always used to work together as men or women alone. Men would do the majority of paid work, women would do all the domestic work. For a boy to come into the kitchen and make his own meal would seem like an embarrassment. Coming here you see men cooking, cleaning, shopping – it's different.

2. What are your experiences of trying to get over these obstacles? And what's your experience of getting the support you need from existing local infrastructure organisations/voluntary sector?

What we do at Arlaadi Somali. We started the organisation in 2002. We talked to schools and with people from our community who could support our younger people. We tried to work with schools, job centres, benefits agency and offering interpreting services for Manchester City Council. Once we were established as a refugee community organisation we offered support and advice, we did it for ourselves.

A problem with schools is that the system would place newly arrived Somali children, with no or little English and with no experience of education, into a class of their peers by age, not by ability. So there is a child sat in class with no English, feeling frustrated and the teachers probably too feeling frustrated with this child. So we started the schools project to work with the school and teachers and to encourage Somali parents to come to the school, to explain and translate what was happening.

We have had excellent support from Refugee Action and Manchester Refugee Support Network (MRSN) with their Sunrise project for new arrivals, helping them get established in the UK.

3. What would make a difference to:

A. Internal: develop your own organisation so you feel you can work around your own needs more effectively?

Having enough funding to employ very effective advocates and activists who understand the system – education, housing – and who can work effectively with others.

Being able to support young people who are underachieving in schools. If they finish school with nothing they will end up on the street. They need good role models who can change the environment, to show they can build their life up, by going into Higher Education. Young people need something else, not life on the street where drug dealers can take advantage, and end up in jail. I think these role models exist, we just need to develop them.

Volunteers – we have had lots of volunteers, but after five to six months they disappear, they move on because they have developed their skills and confidence and can get paid employment, but we need them to provide very needed services. We need to employ them!



B. External: your ability/capacity to engage with others (LSPs, partnerships)?

We can't keep the volunteers who understand how to work with external partners. People like the NHS could pay people for their time to attend meetings and do work. The Jobcentre doesn't pay Arlaadi Somali support people, they book an external interpreter and this can take another 10 to 15 days! The Jobcentre rely on external, national agencies to supply interpreters, but they could make better use of the 5% of adult Somalis in Manchester who can interpret. This would help them meet the more than 100 people a day who need support.

4. What proverbs from your culture relate to community togetherness?

'One finger won't wash a face' – that is, together we can work better.

5. What would help you find common ground with other groups, be less isolated as a group?

Its like a step, like a ladder. You can always take the experience of people who have been through the same thing. When we tried to establish our organisation we had lots of help from Asian community organisations who raised similar issues that we were facing.

MRSN give a good opportunity to bring lots of groups together. It gives you an idea of what others have been through and how to solve problems and get solutions. Community leadership courses, like UK Action on Poverty and MRSN ran, are good for this. We need to have more of these opportunities.

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Interview 3

Innocent Empi, Congo Support Project,

13th February 2008

What is your understanding of community empowerment?

CLG definition of community empowerment:

“Community empowerment is the giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them.”

Community Empowerment is about giving people opportunity, to express themselves, so they can express their needs, their views of things, even political views; to help them feel part of a real community that they are contributing to, so they won't feel isolated. It is about giving people, in the community, the opportunity to confirm themselves and live without fear of anything which can happen to them.

To empower somebody – that is giving people the power to feel responsible and to really act for the benefit of the community. Sometimes you may find people who are not interested in anything so for them everything is wrong – they don't like politics or see politicians as liars who don't observe their promises, they see politicians as getting in for their own wealth. They see the distribution of state wealth as not fair – the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer. Well these people who are not interested in things, these are the people that need to be empowered with a sense of responsibility.

When you have something that is yours it is difficult to lose because it is precious. Certain people who don't want to feel empowered, or who are isolated, they need to be involved. If people at the bottom who are struggling, and saying “no, no, no, it's because of them (the authorities)”, well you have to fairly distribute. And people at the top need to stop categorising – they make laws that meet themselves in these laws, that are self-fulfilling. People will need to find out why the rich are becoming more rich and the poor more poor.

1. What are some of the main obstacles to community empowerment that you face?

Lack of access to public services, and as a community lack of funding. With the first point, there are asylum seekers who cannot access legal representation. They are destitute – this means they have no money for food or housing because it has been ruled in court that they are not allowed humanitarian aid. They rely on aid from charities and churches, and they rely on temporary accommodation. There are about 1000 Congolese people in Manchester and I estimate that more than 300 are destitute here. Now some do work illegally, and support themselves, but the majority of those 300 people are relying on food parcels from the Red Cross and from many churches, here in Manchester! There is no point in talking about community empowerment without letting people live a decent and respected life and avoid differences, which divide people, in the community.

As to the second point, we lack funding as Congo Support Project. We started in February 2007, it took us until July 2007 to get any funding. As I said, we have a community of 1000 people and we support about 300 destitute asylum seekers. We do this on about £24,000 funding a year. Now that the funding secured has run out, we are relying on the good will of people or supporters who donate some money to



keep our work on but this is only a temporary solution and we cannot keep asking or forcing people to give us money to help people in our community. One has to take this responsibility.

2. What are your experiences of trying to get over these obstacles? And what's your experience of getting the support you need from existing local infrastructure organisations/voluntary sector

Getting funding is not easy, and it is made more difficult with the language. You need to be able to manipulate the English language to understand and fill in funding application forms. In terms of writing funding applications people in Congo Support give advice, but it is me who writes the applications, and I only started learning English in September 2005. When accessing services from other voluntary organisations and public bodies that do not speak their language, they always complain of misunderstanding or language barrier. People feel frustrated and do not feel really free to openly ask what they want to ask as services.

We have a destitution project within our community. Congolese people with spare rooms give space for a few days or weeks and they give food. These people who offer space are in difficult housing need themselves. Under NASS (National Asylum Support Service), people under section 4 get £35 of vouchers a week, that can only be redeemed in certain shops, and normal NASS people get £39 cash a week. These people are themselves supporting destitute asylum seekers who have been denied humanitarian aid.

As for Local Infrastructure support, this is not easy. We get help from Manchester Refugee Support Network, and people like you, but there is not a lot of free training. We need to pay for certain courses, which again means we need funding. Courses like welfare benefits, interpreting courses, housing for asylum seekers, how to write funding applications. These are all skills we have to learn to serve our community. On the equivalent of the salary of just one LIO worker we do all this!

3. What would make a difference to:

A. Internal: develop your own organisation so you feel you can work around your own needs more effectively?

We need to get enough resources to support the work we are doing. If ever our members are granted Leave to Remain, they may become independent and support themselves. There will be even a possibility that those granted Leave to Remain will work hard to help others and this will help people in the community to empower themselves with skills, knowledge and experience etc.

B. External: your ability/capacity to engage with others (LSPs, partnerships)?

From experience we work in partnership with other organisations, and we learn from this. This gives us new opportunities to develop our work. We are always developing new networks, for example with CVS in Salford, they put you in touch with other community organisations in Salford. Networking between communities is very helpful.

For higher up, it is like policies are going around without seeing the actual people who make them and want to see them enacted. These are people who don't see you or interact with your work. Hazel Blears, she is our MP in Salford, and I don't know if she knows Congo Support Project exists in Salford, what we're doing. She could call a meeting to bring together the different races.

4. What proverbs from your culture relate to community togetherness?

'Lisanga', it means together.

'Tolingana' means to like or to love. The 'To' in front is 'us' so it means let's like or love ourselves.

'Komibonza mpo ya baninga' means to give himself/herself for the benefits of others.

5. What would help you find common ground with other groups, be less isolated as a group?

Networking. When there are activities that can bring all of us together in Salford we can share our values and cultures, so people will know who we are and we know who they are.

