training module 4: partnerships

What this module includes:

- the aim – working closely with migrant and refugee community organisations
- who and what are MRCOs
- how they develop
- differences and similarities
- how they are financed
- potential ways of working with MRCOs

[Refer to chapter 7 of the CIH/JRF guide]

Working with migrant and refugee community organisations

It is fundamental to the Opening Doors project that organisations participating in it seek to build partnerships with local migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs). Why?

The main reasons are:

- they have important local knowledge about people’s needs
- they provide the basis for engaging with people about how housing bodies can work with migrant/refugee communities
- they may already be offering services formally or informally
- they may have potential to develop further
- partnership working should embrace non-RSL partners that can help to meet diverse needs
- government policy (in the refugee integration strategy Integration Matters) promotes the role of such local groups, as does the Housing Corporation eg in its BME Action Plan.

This module gives general information as the basis for Opening Doors partners to make their own local contacts and partnerships.

Definitions

The working definitions used here are these:

refugee community organisation

RCOs are bodies run by refugees and acting on behalf of or providing services for refugees and/or asylum seekers

migrant community organisation

MCOs are similar bodies run by (mainly non-refugee) migrants, such as economic migrants from EU member states

In this module we refer to them collectively as MRCOs (potential differences between RCOs and MCOs are explained later).
MRCOs – the basics

Many MRCOs serve particular national or ethnic groups (Somalis, Kurds, etc). Some cover broad geographical regions (Africa, Latin America), or are culturally-based (Arabic, Francophone). Yet others focus strongly on women’s needs or deal with particular issues (children, disability, etc).

MRCOs are found throughout Britain but are especially numerous in London (where there are more than 500 RCOs alone) and also in significant numbers in cities like Birmingham, Sheffield, Leicester and elsewhere.

How do MRCOs develop?

MRCOs are typically formed by a small number of committed refugees or migrants who often operate from a private house or a community centre before gradually acquiring premises and funding. They may start by serving a particular nationality, often by providing basic advice on access to services. Their gatherings enable asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants to come together, share information about their country of origin and discuss issues of concern to them.

Many groups have considerable demands made on them by asylum seekers, particularly those whose applications have been refused and who have limited or no resources.

A spectrum of different groups...

Like any community-based groups, MRCOs represent a spectrum from newly-formed organisations (perhaps set up in response to new groups of migrants moving to a particular place, possibly because of asylum dispersal or because of work opportunities) to long-established bodies with a history of serving refugees or migrants over many years.

...with diverse aims

MRCOs have diverse aims. For example, while most provide services at least at a ‘self-help’ level, some may see themselves as mainly advocacy groups – challenging immigration decisions or indeed immigration and wider policy.

At the other end of the ‘spectrum’, some groups may be registered as companies, or even be social enterprises. Others have a mainly cultural focus - and of course some may include all these elements.

...that can lead to complex patterns of groups

Another issue is the complex pattern of groups that develop in some places: for example, one ethnic or nationality group might have a number of different representative organisations in one area. This happens for various reasons - such as the politics of communities living in exile, because different groups provide different specialist services, or because a large country like Somalia is not homogeneous but has different communities within it.

How do MRCOs relate to other local BME organisations?

In many areas, MRCOs exist outside the framework of long-established BME organisations, and may not be part of local umbrella bodies (like multi-faith groups or race equality bodies).

This has changed in some towns as migration has increased and (for example) asylum dispersal has taken place – but the position needs to be investigated at local level.
What differences are there between refugee and migrant groups?

It is difficult to generalise, but representatives of the different groups have themselves suggested the following differences:

■ Refugees are often affected by the trauma associated with being a refugee, affecting their ability to integrate, whereas other migrants may ‘hit the ground running’ and integrate more quickly.

■ Communities evolve from being mainly refugee to being mainly migrant communities, and the same applies to their community organisations. Latin Americans, for example, no longer really see themselves as a refugee community.

■ Some communities overlap – for example, Somali immigrants from other EU countries are statistically ‘migrants’ yet may have similar needs to Somali refugees.

■ Refugees and other migrants often live in different areas. Refugees may have been subject to ‘dispersal’ but then have moved away from dispersal areas later.

■ RCOs work with asylum seekers and are often not concerned about their legal status. Also, they are often supporting people in very vulnerable circumstances.

■ MCOs in contrast are often newly-forming and are working with people who may not plan to be here on a long-term basis.

How are MRCOs financed?

Some government funding for RCO development is available through the Refugee Community Development Fund. Some other Home Office funds, such as the Challenge Fund, can benefit RCOs. Strategy towards funding RCOs is under review at present.

But most groups depend on a combination of locally-accessed public funds and/or sources such as grant-making trusts and the Lottery. Funding is often temporary whereas needs are permanent (or at least, long-term). Short-term funding causes many problems:

■ uncertainty
■ energy devoted to fund-raising instead of providing services
■ difficulty in building expertise because staff are insecure
■ competition for funding between projects
■ pressure to ‘innovate’ or establish new projects even when there is an established need for an already-existing service.

Discussion: How can we find out about local MRCOs?

■ which MRCOs do we already work with?
■ what contacts do they have with other groups?
■ how can we find out about the full spectrum of local groups?
■ can we use local sources to locate groups – shops, cafes, internet cafes?
Ways of working with MRCOs

The CIH guide suggests that housing organisations might want to work with RCOs (and MCOs) in three main ways:

■ supporting the formation of emerging groups
■ help groups develop their capacities
■ create partnerships with established groups

The guide also suggests working with refugee-based housing associations, but these are largely confined to London.

supporting emerging groups

Ways of doing this are suggested on p89 of the Guide. Opening Doors partners may want to consider these possibilities as they begin to make contact with refugee/migrant communities and work with them to assess their and what help they want. Part of this investigation should be to find out what new groups may be emerging and whether there is scope to support them – but hact’s experience is that it is important that the group should already exist in some form.

working with new groups

See p90 of the Guide. A particularly important issue for Opening Doors partners will be establishing the housing and support needs of refugee/migrant communities. Are there new or emerging MRCOs that can help in this process?

working with longer-established groups

If these exist in the area, they are likely to already be a valuable local resource to their communities, offering services and providing the opportunity for longer-term partnerships. Pages 90-91 of the Guide offer suggestions for working with established MRCOs.

Examples of partnership working

Many cases already exist of MRCOs working in partnerships as service providers. A few examples are:

■ London Borough of Haringey has worked with many local MRCOs to act as Supporting People service providers
■ NETT in Sheffield is an MRCO which provides training under contract with Jobcentre Plus
■ Several MRCOs manage accommodation on behalf of HAs, or meet specific accommodation/support needs.

Follow up to training module 4

√ what can we do to support emerging MRCOs?
√ can they help in getting a better picture of local needs?
√ are they potential partners in service provision?
√ how can we start to develop our relationship with them?
√ which suggestions in the Guide might be relevant?
√ do we have any further ideas for joint working with MRCOs that we want to develop through Opening Doors?