

Briefing Paper 85

Moving beyond 'refugeeness': problematising the 'refugee community organisation'

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Introduction

The implementation of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act marked a lasting change in the way asylum seekers were resettled and supported in the United Kingdom. This legislation resulted in the enforced movement of asylum seekers requiring accommodation away from the South East of England, where many pre-existing networks of co-nationals, families and contacts were located, to dispersal sites across the UK. Glasgow was and remains the only sizeable dispersal area in Scotland, with more asylum seekers dispersed to Glasgow than any other regional site in the UK (ICAR 2007). From 2000 to 2010, more than 22,000 asylum seekers were housed in Glasgow.

Despite the non-integrative nature of this policy, friendships and social networks have developed in dispersal areas, from which a number of formalised associations have emerged. Generally categorised as 'refugee community organisations' (RCOs) these associations have been the focus of a number of academic and policy-related studies (for example Zetter and Pearl 2000; Home Office 2004, 2009; Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter 2004, 2005; Zetter et al. 2005; Amas and Price 2008; Lukes 2009; Jones 2010; Phillimore and Goodson 2010), which offer important insights into different aspects of association experiences. However their focus tends to remain largely on the emergence of such groups, and as a result, they fail to capture their life-cycle as they evolve over time, or the different internal and external constraints and opportunities affecting their continuity and sustainability. This produces a number of limiting effects: firstly RCOs tend to be

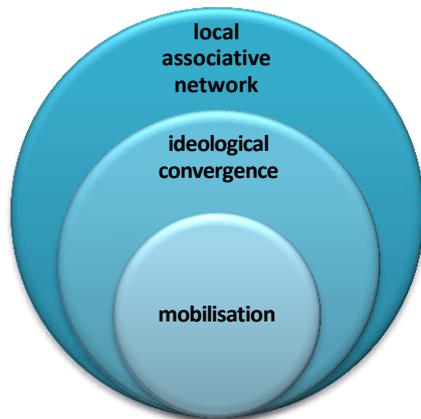
treated in academic and policy research as fixed in time and space as they respond to the effects of dispersal policy. Secondly, they tend to be framed as groups concerned with problems relating almost entirely to asylum and refugee matters. Thirdly, groups' collective identities come to be constructed around a further fixed notion of 'refugeeness'. Fourthly, the effects of changing and differentiated immigration status on group life are largely obscured by the focus on 'refugeeness'. The challenge for researchers, policy makers and practitioners is how to move beyond these limitations that tend to fix individuals, their groups, objectives and foci in time and space, and this paper suggests a framework to do this.

Conceptual Framework

To critically engage with the idea of change and diversity within groups, this paper draws upon Werbner's conceptual schema of three stages that set urban protest movements in motion: localised associative emergence, ideological convergence and finally mobilisation (Werbner 1991a:15) (see Figure 1). This schema is used firstly to frame group emergence and continuity, and then explore how groups themselves self-identify and move beyond imposed labels.

Local networks emerge from associational growth, where associations develop typically to address a wide variety of objectives ranging from social and cultural activities to political goals and concerns with group welfare. Ideological convergence arises in the formulation of common discourses and a set of objectives in relation to the state and the contemporary condition of the group within wider society. Mobilisation occurs when the

Figure 1: stages of association life-cycle (after Werbner 1991a)



movement becomes a recognisable, public protest movement, which usually occurs when there is an issue or event threatening community autonomy or solidarity. The conceptual value of this framework is that it provides a way to analyse transformative change within groups, an entry point to consider the internal processes and their effects on group life, and finally a way to consider how such groups confront imposed constructs of 'refugeeness' on their collective practices and objectives.

Methodology

This paper draws from doctoral research completed in 2011, involving an ethnography of six mainly Francophone and Anglophone African asylum seeker and refugee led-associations in Glasgow (2007-2010). The data draw from the experiences of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants from Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, People's Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The discussion is informed by extensive participant observation over a twenty-six month period, 46 in-depth individual interviews, group discussions, and analysis of online fora and printed materials (for example, written constitutions, internal rules, minutes, newsletters, articles).

Discussion

Studying group life over time: the problem with the 'RCO' category

A number of (mainly UK-based) studies have emerged since the late 1980s offering important insights into how asylum seeker and refugee-led associations and social networks function as a source of social capital, and as a critical mechanism for coping and survival in exile

(Salinas et al. 1987; Gold 1992; Wahlbeck 1998; Zetter and Pearl 2000; Kelly 2003; Zetter et al. 2005; Griffiths et al. 2004, 2005; Phillimore and Goodson 2010). Most often, but not exclusively categorised as RCOs (for example see Mayblin and Soteri-Proctor 2011), these studies very effectively recognise the specific social, political and structural circumstances relating to asylum seekers and refugees, the way in which 'community' is conceptualised as it relates to these populations, and the complex asymmetrical relations that exist between such groups and the state. They also reveal ways in which the collective forms and practices categorised as RCOs have originally been organised around immigration status. In this sense, the relationship between immigration status and Werbner's (1991a) first stage of local associative empowerment is clear: association emergence is often described by members as a direct response to dispersal policy, and the struggle to build new forms of social relations in the face of increasingly punitive immigration asylum and immigration legislative regime, characterised by non-integrative policy mechanisms. However, the lack of attention to the changing nature of immigration status on group life is largely missing in these accounts. It is argued this imposes a fictive unity on social relations within groups around immigrations status, leads to a misplaced focus on the 'refugeeness' of members and fails to explore processes of change within groups over time.

Changing and differentiated immigration status and the emergence of the local associative network

Changing immigration status impacts groups in three ways that can challenge fictive unity and shift the focus away from refugeeness: in terms of claims to representativeness; effects of positive decisions on identity claims; and as a source of internal conflict and tension.

- Representativeness relates to the internal diversity of groups, which included members who were asylum seekers, refugees, students, professional and skilled, semi and un-skilled migrants and dependents. From the outset then, the RCO label was ill fitting, failing to reflect this internal diversity, to recognise that expectations of the group were

relative to the precariousness of one's immigration status; or that differentiated immigration status meant some members had a stronger voice than others in influence the group's direction. As a result many members and groups rejected the RCO label as distinctly non-representative, whilst others saw it as potentially existing alongside other labels relating to ethnicity or nationality. Changing immigration status also directly affected participation rates, which then impacted upon claims to representativeness of a particular population or 'community'.

- Varying participation levels were closely connected to the changing immigration status of members in groups. Positive decisions affect individual members' needs of groups, but also of the collective identity of groups and processes of group formation and sustainability. The question of sustainability was more complex than about groups fulfilling their goals and framing closure in terms of success. Members articulated a strong sense that group sustainability was integral to establishing as a newly settling migrant population in Glasgow. This emphasised the need for a conceptual shift away from the RCO label and 'refugeeness' when studying group practices, and attention to members' claims to alternative representations as 'Black Minority Ethnic' (BME) populations.
- A final effect of changing and differentiated immigration status related to the way this exposed internal tensions within groups; and how individual members experienced - positively and negatively - the changing and differentiated immigration status of other members. In some instances asylum seeker members felt they were becoming a minority within a minority and that a hierarchy of immigration status was emerging. Further tensions were revealed in varying degrees of active involvement as they related to immigration status and the ways in which particular immigration status restricted possibilities of participation, from physically attending meetings to having a stronger voice in collective affairs.

Changing and differentiated immigration status and effects on ideological convergence

Ideological convergence, as the second stage of Werbner's framework, provides a useful way to understand certain features of the association life-cycle. That is, how a group's collective identity evolves over time, extends beyond the group boundary, and the effects this has on sustainability. On the one hand, widening the lens beyond stages of association emergence reveals ways in which groups make assertions of convergences and alignment with other 'minorities', thus extending beyond 'refugeeness' in how they self-identify. On the other hand, these same groups did, on occasion, find themselves strategically engaging with labels to justify their distinctive social and political position within the broader discourses of 'minority' associations. This was particularly so in relation to accessing ring-fenced 'refugee funds'. This reveals practices that are common across a range of populations categorised as 'vulnerable' or 'hard to reach', and that, in many ways, groups labelled as RCOs are no different in how they operate to survive a difficult funding climate.

But more is also happening: whilst members complain of being 'over-consulted' as RCOs on asylum and refugee matters they also express frustration at being 'under-consulted' on wider BME matters which they themselves consider relevant to their collective identity and future trajectory as settling migrant populations. It is argued then that the focus on RCO labelling and on 'refugeeness', and lack of attention to differentiated immigration status within such groups contributes to this 'see-saw' effect of 'over/under consultation'. Under question is the degree to which external actors' disposition to label groups by immigration status serves to reinforce their representation as vulnerable groups and excludes them from the wider BME sector. How do groups challenge this categorisation process? One such way was through expressions of alignment with common discourses, struggles and experiences of other BME communities who have had to fight for resources and mobilised around 'ethnicised' identities. This in itself marks a shift from refugeeness to articulations of 'BMEness' which, although problematic in itself in presupposing and romanticising homogenous communities, does

provide a way for groups to practice forms of ideological convergence.

Importantly, the Glasgow research reveals that practices of ideological convergence co-exist alongside the development of a local associative network, and these stages can happen simultaneously. This avoids an overly stagist approach to the community life-cycle, and emphasizes the fluidity of group life and of collective identities.

Changing and differentiated immigration status and implications for mobilisation

This paper argues for a shift away from 'refugeeness' when studying group life. However, when mobilisation occurred around an issue or event threatening community autonomy or solidarity, in most cases during the research this was largely framed around immigration matters. But importantly, mobilisation practices were not limited to a specific group but would also extend beyond association boundaries, addressing broader issue of discrimination, inequalities and disadvantage as experienced by wider BME populations. These related particularly to issues around employment, housing and awareness raising around rights and entitlements. Such mobilisation reveals an interesting phenomenon, that different association types and practices may be understood as co-present in each stage of the proposed framework and that different groups interests can co-exist side by side. *In sum, groups can simultaneously focus on and mobilise around refugee matters which relate to 'refugeeness' and wider settlement matters that can be understood as relating to their 'BMEness'.*

Concluding comments and further questions

By advocating a life-cycle approach to analysing association life, this paper has explored various internal and external factors and processes which affect group emergence and sustainability. In light

of changing policies as they relate to asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, BME populations and integration and community cohesion, it is difficult to know what lies ahead for these groups. For example, how are they to position themselves in a new policy characterised by funding cuts? Will this shrinking funding environment push groups to retreat back to, increasingly limited, ring-fenced 'refugee money'? Can, or indeed should, asylum seeker and refugee-led groups effectively compete in the wider BME sector? What might the consequences of this be? Will, or can, they have longevity in competing sectors? How might this move beyond 'refugeeness' contribute to broader debates of integration and 'settlement' and the role such groups may play in the Big Society agenda if recognised as belonging to the wider BME population? These questions suggest areas for further research into association life and sustainability.

As Lukes (2009) argues, to access so-called hidden or hard-to-reach populations, movement from where we are is essential. *But these populations must also be allowed movement in how they self-identify and define their practices, experiences, values and collective identities. Only then can change within groups be firstly recognised and secondly understood in its complexity.* The benefit of a life-cycle approach using the framework is that it allows for an increasingly sophisticated understanding of change within groups as it occurs in response to internal and external factors to be developed. It provides a way to move beyond 'refugeeness' and to identify and understand important overlaps and interconnectedness between different segments within a broader population. *Listening to how groups self-align could lead to their involvement in the relevant conversations to effectively move beyond 'refugeeness', to work towards equal access to opportunities and to help newly settling minority populations develop their place as part of wider civil society.*



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