

The potential of migrant and community organisations to influence policy

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A report on a partnership set up to test how migrant and refugee community organisations could change policies and practices that are crucial to the lives of their communities.

'Change from Experience' addresses the ways in which migrant and community groups can use their own history and experience to develop the skills to bring about change. It challenges ideas about these organisations as 'comfort zones' and places them at the centre of debates about identity, gender, migration and cohesion. This report looks at:

- how a partnership based on 'critical pedagogy' – a learning tool used in community development – was created;
- methods and processes;
- the experiences of the three organisations involved;
- what did and did not work in the processes and why;
- core elements in the curriculum that are useful to organisations wishing to change themselves; and
- why migrant and refugee organisations struggle with policy.

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1 Introduction

Change from Experience was a project set up to explore ways in which migrant and refugee community organisations could develop and extend their capacity to influence policy at all relevant levels on behalf of communities. It formed part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) Immigration and Inclusion Programme, and was funded as a non-research activity to:

- *re-examine current assumptions and approaches in policy and practice, and generate fresh ways of thinking, acting and talking about the issues;*
- *explore how institutions, agencies and partnerships can assist migrant and community groups to realise their potential.*
(Funding application for the project)

In line with the approach, this report seeks to explain both the theoretical basis of the methods used as well as the practical outcomes and their use for others working in the field.

The report is based on various sources: the records of the project itself, interviews with participants, a project report written by Yesenia San Juan, the Praxis project worker, and a paper written by Vaughan Jones, the Director of Praxis, on the pedagogy involved.

2 Refugee community organisations (RCOs) and migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs): what are they, are they coping and can they influence?

Most waves of migration, forced or not, set up or bring with them organisations that serve their communities. Refugee community organisations (RCOs) have become part of the currency of efforts to resettle, integrate and involve refugees in the UK, defined by what they do:

Most RCOs start by acting as

- *Informal befriending structures*
- *Organisers of sports or cultural activities*
- *Representatives of their community to local agencies*
- *Political structures in exile*
- *Providers of ad hoc emergency services such as accommodation and informal advice*

Many go on to provide (usually with some funding)

- *Advice services*
- *Interpreting and translating services*
- *Advocacy services*
- *A partner in consultation with local statutory agencies*
- *Services for children, especially supplementary schools*

Some may also offer (once more secure and funded)

- *Training and employment services*
- *Housing services*
- *Supporting People and other care services.*
(Pre-publication copy of Hutton and Lukes, 2008)

RCOs are also defined by who they are and so, essentially, an RCO is any organisation that is not only working with refugees but is also run by them. Briefly, RCOs were incorporated into the National Refugee Integration Strategy proposed by the UK Government in *Integration Matters* (Home Office, 2005), which noted:

RCOs are a crucial resource where they exist, especially in bridging links with the wider public, deriving their strength not only from refugees' strong impulse to self-help, independence, and the desire to make a positive contribution to the society that has provided refuge, but also from the unique resources of their members, such as language skills and understanding of community needs. While they are typically run on a low budget, many have developed a high level of professional competence.

More recently, however, the Government has closed down the small funding streams allocated to refugee community development and moved to contract for refugee integration services with large providers.

With an increasing focus in the UK on other types of migration (especially since the arrival of over half a million migrants from the new European Union countries in eastern Europe since 2004), the attention has shifted to 'migrant and refugee community organisations' (MRCOs). This has involved a belated acknowledgement that the

boundaries between refugees and migrants were always blurred.

- Many community organisations were set up by settled migrants to help newly arrived refugees.
- Most refugee communities include people who may be more accurately defined as migrants because they did not arrive through the asylum system or refugee programmes, although they may be within the families of refugees.
- Refugees have often been the prime movers in setting up migrant community organisations (MCOs).

In practice, thus, there are not many significant differences between the 'MRCO sector' and the 'RCO sector', even though there are very important differences between the experiences of individual refugees and other migrants, as well as their legal rights in the UK.

This widening of focus and range has, however, come at a time when organisations run by refugees and migrants are finding it increasingly difficult to survive. In 2002, Gamaledin-Ashami *et al.*, basing their analysis on an international study of integration, explained how RCOs work in a sort of hierarchy of needs,¹ but found that:

RCOs are meeting the basic needs of their users and creating opportunities for them to feel part of the community, but there is little activity to enable asylum seekers and refugees to participate in society. In order to do this, RCOs need to develop stronger mutual links with mainstream organisations so that effectively they are not marginalised by them.

(Gamaledin-Ashami *et al.*, 2002)

Two years later, Griffiths *et al.* (2004) wrote a 'social capital analysis' of refugee community organisations and developed the point:

While it is clear that RCOs provide vital welfare services it is not clear how far they act to promote the long-term integration of refugees, given the increasing short-termism of their activity.

(Griffiths *et al.*, 2004)

In other words, if resources to support their activities were not sufficient, the greater the demands made on RCOs, the less likely they were to aid the integration of refugees, individually or collectively, because they simply could not spare the time or effort to make the links, think through the issues and develop work that might have a policy impact.

In spite of the fact that there is general agreement that communities that have strong 'bonds' are more likely to 'bridge' to other communities, or even to 'link' to power (in other words, to have real influence), developments since the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) reported on *Our Shared Future* have undermined still further the minimal support offered to refugee and migrant organisations. The Commission recommended that:

... funding to community groups should be rebalanced towards those that promote integration and cohesion, and ... 'Single Group Funding' should be the exception rather than the rule for both Government and external funders.

(Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007)

'Single groups' were described as providing a 'comfort zone' from which members found it difficult to move on to make contact with other communities and, although it was acknowledged that some communities (especially new arrivals) might have no mainstream provision accessible to them, the presumption was, in future, to be against supporting such groups, and it was recommended that any support be conditional on the promotion of cohesion and integration. In the guidance produced in response, still out for consultation, the Government suggests instead that:

... to meet our goals on integration and cohesion, funders should seek to find the appropriate balance between bridging activities, building relationships and links between people from different backgrounds, and activities which support particular groups alone.

(Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008)

So MRCOs are at a crossroads. Some are stuck in a pattern of urgent responses to pressing individual needs that prevent them from even considering links with other communities or influencing the wider world. There is a perception that, possibly as a result of the strictures on 'single group funding,' MRCOs are finding it increasingly difficult to get funding or other resources, just at a time when their skills with and knowledge about newly arrived communities could be most valued.

Some, however, have established themselves, found roles as service providers, become respected local institutions or even partners to statutory agencies. It remains true, however, that most, even those that are organised by people with many years of political and social influence in their home countries (or internationally), struggle to secure real influence on decisions and processes in the UK.

3 Why Change from Experience?

Change from Experience was one of three projects funded from the non-research budget allocated to Immigration and Inclusion by JRF after a competitive selection process. It was developed as a partnership between three organisations: Praxis (the lead), the Kurdish Cultural Centre and Latin American Women's Aid. The project aimed:

... to work together over a twelve month period to:

- *marshal the knowledge and experience of the three agencies through the construction of a narrative (telling the story) of the experience of communities at ground level and the web of working relationships with key agencies*
- *negotiate effectively with partners to improve processes within day to day working relationships with key stakeholders and equip the partners to be more effective at advocating for the communities at regional and national level.*

The project will result in immediate positive changes at local level and expand the sphere of influence of all partners to bring about longer term and sustainable change.

(Project proposal)

The project's objectives were defined and clarified at an early stage once the project team had been set up and was functioning. The objectives were to:

1. construct a common narrative based on the experiences of MRCOs;
2. develop sustainable mechanisms of obtaining data from their users' experiences, the organisation and its services with an embedded use of self-defined methods and approaches;
3. develop sustainable mechanisms of engagement and working relationships and access to policy and decision-making processes with stakeholder statutory and non-statutory agencies;
4. improve the understanding of stakeholders with regard to the issues faced by the communities served by MRCOs;
5. enhance all partners' negotiating skills;
6. document learning outcomes from all processes for wider dissemination and replication.
7. create tools and materials that would allow the partner organisations to present them to the public, stakeholders and other networks and agencies.

4 Who were the project partners?

Praxis, the lead partner, is a voluntary organisation that 'aims to be with displaced communities, listening and acting through our common humanity to create and nurture reconciliation, human rights and social justice'.¹ It has been working with refugee and migrant organisations for over 20 years. Praxis' engagement at the level of policy and practice in community development drives, and is driven by, the transformational process that is at the heart of its method of working – the 'action-reflection-action' model of community development. Praxis holds strong community links and is positioned as a significant player in the local, regional and national public policy environment. The Director, for example, chaired the National Refugee Integration Forum Community Development sub-group. It is also a service provider in its own right, running advice, training and other services from its base in Bethnal Green. This is visited by over 10,000 people a year and has provided a home for many migrant and refugee community groups, mainly as a seedbed for new groups. Praxis, however, emphasises the value of solidarity and real commitment and has developed models for these relationships that include mutual learning, shared decision-making and an active involvement in development.

All of the organisations are relatively old for the refugee and migrant community sector and were set up in the 1980s.

The Kurdish Cultural Centre (KCC) was formed in 1985 and is the oldest of the non-Turkish Kurdish migrant organisations. It is a membership organisation with 1,600 people on its database,

many of whom are paying subscriptions of £10–20 a year. It owns its premises, which were bought through fund-raising by the community. It coordinates its activities with many other Kurdish associations across the UK and, while focused on London, provides services nationally. It offers advice services to those who contact the centre, but has also organised regular seminars and conferences related to immigration and housing matters, and a range of cultural events. KCC also leads in the promotion and organisation of campaigns related to policy developments, international events and matters that directly affect the Kurdish community in the UK, Iran and Iraq. The centre operates with a mix of paid staff and volunteers, and has an active management committee. It did, however, lose its main source of funding in 2004.

Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA) is a member of the Women's Aid Federation. It was set up in 1983 by women active in the community who were concerned that there was nowhere for Latin American women fleeing domestic violence to go, and who eventually developed a refuge in partnership with a housing association. LAWA continues to work with the community and to operate the refuge, which has space for six women and up to twelve children, plus an advice centre and office. It holds contracts with local authorities to provide Supporting People services in and out of the refuge. LAWA has also developed a capacity-building partnership project to support other black and minority ethnic organisations and this has now been running for four years.

5 Why did they do it?

The partnership was always based on Praxis' acknowledged expertise in working with other migrant and refugee organisations, and a desire by both of the other partners to identify key stakeholders and develop work to improve the relationships.

Praxis, however, also had a particular interest in providing evidence for the efficacy of its methodology of critical pedagogy as a tool within community development. This, it believed, not only had a possible application to enable the partners to improve the ways in which they worked, but also was firmly rooted in a human rights oriented value base, which ensured that, even where specific objectives were not achieved, the process itself would be enriching for all concerned.

During the project, Vaughan Jones, the Director of Praxis, wrote a paper outlining how critical pedagogy works, its application to the project and the lessons learned. The paper is reproduced in Appendix 1 to this report, and is also available from Praxis, but parts are summarised and quoted here to explain why Praxis embarked on the project.

Critical pedagogy derives from the work of Paulo Freire, the author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in Brazil in the 1970s, and is used all over Latin America and in many contexts internationally. While it is essentially about learning, it is applied as much in community development (and even, for example, in the forum theatre of Augusto Boal) as it is in more formal educational contexts. It is 'a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness' based on action learning, which 'assumes that the knowledge, skill and experience to bring about change is latent within the people for whom change is needed. This is not a capacity that needs to be "built" but a consciousness that needs to be "raised"' (Vaughan Jones paper, see

Appendix 1). In other words, the learning, and especially the learning about the potential and role that the individual and organisation has within the political, economic and social context, is as important as any other external results:

Change from Experience is an attempt by Praxis to broaden its own experience of using critical pedagogy as an instrument for empowering a voice for refugee and migrant communities. Paulo Freire speaks of the 'culture of silence' within excluded groups. The first step to the alleviation of poverty and differential disadvantage is to enable and amplify a voice.

(Vaughan Jones paper, see Appendix 1)

In setting up and running the project, Praxis called on what it considers to be a core value of the organisation, that of solidarity based on 'qualities of gentleness, openness, commitment to the other' and also on recognition of diversity and complexity.

Praxis also describes its role as an organisation promoting human rights, but it believes that the human rights it espouses can be 'a creative challenge to the status quo and stimulate development and change' and 'an expression of an order of human values that transcends the everyday experience of uprooted communities'. This understanding, however, also illuminated Praxis' role as lead organisation in the project because, while it was committed to being an agent of change, it was also committed to embracing change itself. The pedagogues also expected to learn and rejected any models of learning based on deficits or dogmas. 'We must avoid arrogantly proclaiming ourselves as the vision or defining intended outcomes as absolutes' (Vaughan Jones paper, see Appendix 1).

6 What did they do? Three organisations and three accounts

The project located a part-time member of staff in each of the partner agencies. Alongside the coordinator of the project at Praxis, these staff formed a project team, which was scheduled to meet every month to exchange experience and consult on progress. Directors of the three partner organisations also formed a steering group, which was to meet bimonthly to oversee progress and direct project initiatives. The project was originally due to run for a year, but it was extended for a further quarter with appropriate funding from JRF.

Praxis

Setting up the project

Change from Experience aimed to explore methodologies that would bring about significant changes in the work of MRCOs, with positive effects on their client groups and their influence on public policy and decision-making processes. The project was thus designed to engage MRCOs in partnership work, with Praxis as the lead partner. In the project development stage, three MRCOs were approached and consulted. However, because of the resources available, the capacity requirements and anticipated processes, it was then decided to select and work with two MRCOs – Latin American Women's Aid and the Kurdish Cultural Centre. These two organisations were involved in finalising the project details and, once the project had started, they entered into a formal partnership agreement with Praxis. The Memorandum of Understanding agreed stipulated aims and objectives, roles of each partner, working procedures, staffing and management, and reporting arrangements.

The principal driver to this Memorandum and the process that followed throughout the project was to create a mechanism that:

- facilitated ownership of the process at the MRCO level;
- provided a framework for a flexible and supporting environment that also allowed all to draw on experiences from Praxis and elsewhere;
- was conducive to employing the action-reflection-action methodology.

The project team consisted of a part-time project worker based in each MRCO, a part-time project coordinator and a project lead at Praxis.

Meetings between members of the project team were held regularly. These provided the space for in-depth discussion on planning project initiatives, developing and reviewing methods and activities, reflecting on progress and updating the team on changes and developments in the project and each partner organisation.

One-to-one sessions of reflection were also held, especially in the initial phase, between the project lead and project workers.

These meetings were also designed to set the basis for the work that the MRCOs would carry out independently and allow follow-up and close support by the lead partner organisation. All meetings were carefully recorded and action points reviewed at the following meeting.

The project steering group involved the managers from KCC, LAWA and Praxis' Director. They were due to meet bimonthly (although the meetings were sometimes more irregular) in order to review the progress made and discuss specific matters affecting each organisation at a structural/organisational level. This space provided the partner organisations with the opportunity to exchange experiences and openly discuss their aims and the barriers faced by the organisations in developing the project.

Throughout, the method used in developing the work with partners was that of action-reflection-action:

- an initial facilitated self-assessment of existing conditions;
- development of a methodology and action plan;

- actions supported by a regular process of reviewing methodology and practice;
- taking stock of initiatives and reflection leading to an updated action plan.

They represented the process as a table (see Table 1).

Table 1

Process				
Experience – constructing a narrative	Context	Describing the environment in which the organisation operates	One-to-one interviews Case studies Workshops	
	History	Asking what are the external historical forces that gave rise to the organisation	Timelines	
		Asking what are the immediate external events impacting on the organisation	Focus groups	
	Ideas and values	Asking what is the motivation behind the formation of the organisation	Interviews with key personnel	
		Asking what are the motivations that underpin the people involved	Focus groups	
	Organisation		Asking what are the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation	Interviews and focus groups
			Asking how the organisation developed	Timelines
	Sector	Asking how the organisation relates to other organisations	Relationship mapping	
Analysis	PESTLE analysis	Constructing an understanding of the political, economic, sociological, technological, legal and environmental factors that impact on the organisation	Desk research/ policy reviews	
	Causes	Understanding why things are as they are. Who gains? Who pays?	But why? Workshops	
Reflection	Mirroring	Look at the organisation as it is to test whether it reflects the values and aspirations of the stakeholders	Reflection days	
	Microscoping	Looking at some of the detailed work to test whether the organisation is delivering through its values	Consultancies/ mentoring	
	Telescoping	Looking at the organisation from the perspective of the long-term aspirations	Organisational development training	
Dialogue	Stakeholder analysis	Mapping stakeholders		
	Negotiations	Focusing on key areas for change and strategising	'Win-win' training	

Delivering the project: facilitating the narrative

Narrative has a particular importance in the practice of critical pedagogy. History is made by the people, the books merely report it, but the interpretation of history and its understanding can itself shape future events. Creating a narrative is to write our own history and so to discover ourselves. A narrative, however, has to be multi-layered, to allow for difference and dynamics. Allowing a collective narration of the organisation's story, including the views and memories of staff, management committee and beneficiaries, enables relationships to be mapped and the social, cultural, economic, environmental and political context at different key points to be defined.

Praxis thus set out to develop a narrative of each organisation's story, setting them in the historical context, recognising that they had been set up within a particular moment, but each organisation now might need to look at its story differently in order to open up new opportunities. The narrative also explored the ideas and values that each organisation believed it represented and worked within, the organisation as a structure and the sector within which each organisation worked. While the methodology works for any organisation, in these two cases, there was also discussion about the nature of the communities within which each works and the fact that they include many people who try to stay hidden from view (such as women fleeing from violent men or rejected asylum seekers now overstaying). The relating of the story must consider the extent to which that story may be laid out to public view, the ethical issues involved and their centrality to the organisation's story.

The synthesised narrative developed is included as Appendix 2.

Delivering the project: reflection and training

As lead partner, Praxis organised the reflection sessions and days. Again, reflection has a central part to play in critical pedagogy. It is described by Vaughan Jones as 'the search for the ah-hah moment': a breakthrough or a shift in consciousness. It is also described as a mirror, but it is one that might reflect back an unrecognisable image:

KCC is a small community-based organisation in Kennington and it is engaged with a violent and dangerous situation that is shaping global politics. If any organisation is at the sharp end, it is KCC but it sells itself as a local advice centre. LAWA has a root in assertive feminism but its aspiration is for an ongoing contract with Islington Council. It is not a cutting-edge organisation any more but it has broken into a mainstream space that others would envy. Holding the mirror to one's self enables sight of the unexpected.

(Vaughan Jones paper, see Appendix 1)

Reflection thus looks at identity, at values, at why things were done then and why they might not be done now, at what has been learned and what 'continues to puzzle and challenge the organisation'. It also reflects on how the organisation built up its narrative. Praxis described two further processes: mirroring and telescoping. The former looks at the quotidian and the small things as a way of uncovering more truths about values and how the organisation lives them. The latter takes the wide and large view of the place of the organisation in the global narrative, and the ways in which its actions have shaped or can shape the world in which it operates. This last was designed to enable partners to move on to the next stage, to seek to influence key stakeholders.

Two joint reflection sessions were organised involving both the steering group and project team members. One was held halfway through and the other at the end of the project. These sessions evaluated progress, the learning and overall outcomes of the project at each stage. They were supplemented by two reflection days designed to bring in wider expertise and provide a platform for extended reflection on the learning process and next steps.

In addition to the one-to-one sessions, the meetings and the reflection sessions, all of which involved a significant transfer of knowledge, Praxis organised a formal training session halfway through the project. The three partners agreed that this would most usefully cover negotiating skills, since at this point they were about to approach stakeholders with the issues on which they had decided they wanted to make progress.

The training on negotiating skills was also embedded in the methodology of critical pedagogy. It represented a recognition that partners could exercise power and that they could deal with powerful stakeholders as equals. It was based on 'win-win' negotiating:

The dynamics of the negotiation are based on an ability to recognise mutual interests and potential trade-offs, a capacity to focus on outcomes and solutions, a willingness to propose alternatives and to lay aside past differences. Key to this is the understanding of the power that the organisation holds.

(Vaughan Jones paper, see Appendix 1)

Delivering the project: defining the changes wanted and working with stakeholders

The stated aim of the project was to bring about at least one sustainable change needed by each organisation. Each of the organisations identified relevant stakeholders, determined the themes they wanted to work on (based on the service-level information collated and the aspirations of each organisation) and then selected the single stakeholder they most needed to influence in order to bring about necessary change.

The process of identifying priorities involved an in-depth analysis of expected outcomes from work with potential stakeholders. Initially, several stakeholders were identified and consideration was given to a set of questions to prioritise issues that would viably translate into lobbying themes and inform the process of selecting a single stakeholder to work with throughout the project. The set of questions explored included the following.

- What needed to be changed with regards to the stakeholder and why?
- What were the priorities?
- What could be done to achieve this and how could this work be carried out?
- What methods could be used to record the changes occurring over the course of the project?

Initially, all three organisations considered the option of effectively delegating the initial contact with the selected stakeholders to Praxis, but agreed that it was better for the individual MRCOs to do this, supported by the project and by the training in negotiation skills they had undertaken.

KCC

Working with users: gathering service-level evidence

KCC focuses on the support, settlement and integration of the Kurdish diaspora – hence the relevance of individuals' experiences during the asylum and settlement process. Developing insight on the events, successes and struggles experienced by the displaced Kurdish community was essential and would provide KCC with factual information that could be used when approaching and negotiating with stakeholders, and lobbying at local, regional and national level. This, however, needed to account for sensitivities arising because of traumatic experiences of migration, cultural sensitivities and specific problems faced by the Kurdish community. It also meant that the methods for gathering evidence from users would have to provide for an informal and relaxed environment to allow participants to open up and express their life experiences. KCC is also a pan-London organisation that covers a wide range of advice areas such as housing, immigration, education and welfare.

In the light of all of the above, the methods considered included: seminars and social occasions, focus groups, workshops, storytelling, semi-structured interviews and case studies. Setting up priorities, deciding on methods that would fit with sensitive situations and recruiting participants in order to allow the community to be fairly represented proved more difficult than initially anticipated. KCC realised during the process that it was not realistic to carry out all of those activities within the time frame given and with the resources available, and so it decided to focus on the development of five case studies and two mixed focus groups. The project team meetings allowed KCC to bring up questions related to approaches, including number of participants and composition of the focus groups, facilitation and methods of recording and transcription. Despite

the cancellation of one focus group session because of lack of attendance, the process soon harmonised and KCC started to feel more confident and to share the learning with LAWA. The case studies exercise was carried out steadily, as most of the information was gathered from existing case files and was complemented by telephone interviews.

KCC carried out five in-depth case studies. The case studies reflect the difficulties and struggles faced by newly arrived members of the Kurdish community who approach the centre seeking support. The progress of their cases is recorded in case files. KCC opted for the development of this method, as the information contained in case files is detailed and easily accessible. The main advantage was that the client did not have to travel personally to KCC to be interviewed and therefore the cost and timescale necessary for the development of these case studies was less. However, the fact that these case studies are based purely on already recorded information prevents the recording of the client's personal perceptions and latest developments. The case studies record the experiences of two former users and three current users of the service.

KCC's case studies focused mainly on new arrivals accessing its service. These provide a detailed record of the issues dealt with by the advisers, with examples of the complexity and difficulties faced around housing, welfare benefits, immigration and travel documents. The outcome outlined the background of the case, and how the users arrived and claimed asylum in the UK. Some clients whose asylum claims were refused were referred to legal agencies, mainly Law Centres and Citizens Advice Bureaux, because the advice provided is free and clients have limited financial resources. An important issue described is the application for travel documents to allow clients to travel back to their countries of origin to visit family and friends, and how this was affected by the changes in the Home Office when applying for a UK travel document and how the Iraqi Embassy was not issuing Iraqi passports because the issuing office is based in Baghdad. The case studies also provided accounts of referrals made to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) for those willing to take voluntary return.

Two 45-minute focus groups of seven

participants each were carried out. These were male and female combined groups of people with different backgrounds and immigration status. The purpose of these exercises was to find out about the different experiences of KCC clients in relation to the process of applying/obtaining a valid travel document and the reasons behind their decision to stay in the UK or return to Kurdistan. The focus groups were conducted in Kurdish and the combined transcription translated into English. The participants were provided with lunch and travel expenses were covered.

The discussion provides detailed understanding of the users' encounters with the Home Office, their reasons for leaving the UK or deciding to leave for Kurdistan, and their experiences with the Iraqi Embassy. There was also evidence about how participants' identity as Kurdish and their categorisation as 'stateless' within the context of present-day Iraq affects them. Holding a valid passport was seen as an important means not only for travel to the country of origin, but also for realising their identity and exercising freedom. Having a UK travel document allows a certain degree of freedom, but does not allow refugees to travel to the country of origin, where their families often reside.

Working with stakeholders: proposing change

Following this approach and using its user-level evidence, KCC identified problems that complicated travel arrangements to Kurdistan/Iraq as the main theme. These included obtaining visas and applying for Iraqi passports and Home Office travel documents. The stakeholders to consider included the Home Office, the Refugee Council and the Iraqi Embassy. Initial discussion carried out at KCC identified the Home Office as a priority and the Immigration and Nationality Department as the main stakeholder. The ensuing reflection exercise showed that work with the Home Office regarding issues of obtaining travel documents would have been complicated and meaningful influencing might have proved difficult because it required broader changes in immigration policy, which were not achievable within the lifetime of the project. The Refugee Council was seen as an approachable agency with which KCC has an established relationship, but it has little or no involvement in issues of travel documents. The

Iraqi Embassy was found to be the stakeholder that could realistically be approached using existing networks and resources, with the potential to produce positive outcomes for KCC's service users and the organisation's profile.

KCC opted to approach the Iraqi Embassy initially in a more informal way, making use of its contacts and networking skills, and to follow up by combining formal meetings with telephone conversations and informal networking. This approach fitted better with the Iraqi Embassy availability and was more appropriate culturally. Several attempts were made to initiate contact, but KCC realised that the Embassy did not have enough information about the organisation's background and relevance for the Kurdish community. It thus took longer than initially expected to be able to have a formal meeting.

Eventually, a meeting was held at the Iraqi Embassy where KCC had the chance to discuss the issues faced by Kurdish citizens trying to apply for an Iraqi passport. This was followed by a second meeting in a more informal environment and then an invitation to embassy staff to participate in social and community events.

The results of these approaches were not entirely as planned, but have been very positive. The relationship between KCC and the Iraqi Embassy was revitalised. Users' concerns about the arrangements for travel documents are now understood by the Embassy, as is KCC's important role in advocating for its users and defending their rights to equal, respectful and appropriate treatment. Staff from the Iraqi Embassy and Consulate are now more involved in activities and events carried out at KCC, and KCC staff and MC members are invited to receptions at the Embassy.

The core problem, however, remains unresolved. KCC hopes to continue the work until it is. It plans to set up regular meetings and push for equality of treatment for all Iraqis at the Embassy irrespective of race, religion and political view. It will increase its advocacy for people applying for Iraqi passports and will lobby the Embassy to start processing passport applications in Britain (at present they are processed in Baghdad). It also hopes to develop a procedure for the KCC to corroborate the Kurdish identity of people with no ID who are known to the organisation.

LAWA

Working with users: gathering service-level evidence

LAWA provides two services: temporary accommodation and an advice and advocacy service for women who are not contemplating leaving their home or have no recourse to public funds. Because of the sensitive and confidential nature of the problems presented by LAWA's client group, the organisation had to look carefully at methods that both suited the personal circumstances of the participants and allowed the organisation to extract relevant information about their experiences. LAWA wanted to allow innovation and creativity to be part of the experience, as this would motivate the participation of women otherwise too distressed and demotivated to engage in the project.

In trying to combine creative therapy for women experiencing hardship with evidence gathering, consideration was given to focus groups, semi-structured interviews, creative play/drama, children's drawings, poetry workshops, storytelling and creative writing exercises. However, following a reflection on these approaches, LAWA realised that some of them were unsuitable for its users, would have involved too many specialised facilitators or the outcomes might not necessarily have provided the required information. There were also issues of confidentiality to which the organisation has to adhere strictly. Discussion at LAWA and the project team resolved that it would not be feasible to carry out all the suggested activities and LAWA decided to concentrate on the development of two focus groups, three case studies and dance movement therapy sessions.

The process of recruiting participants took a long time and proved somewhat difficult, despite the fact that travel expenses and childcare were provided, and responses were not as forthcoming as initially anticipated. The dance therapy session was carried out over two days with the same women and the conclusions were typed by the facilitator for analysis. The case studies also involved shadowing advice workers and going through their case files, and turned out to be more time-consuming and longer than expected.

LAWA completed three in-depth case studies. The cases are a direct reflection of the work delivered at the advice centre and the refuge with women fleeing from domestic violence, who present with many different issues all of which require immediate and urgent attention. Two are from the advice centre (one referred by the police) and one about a refuge resident. They were developed alongside the advice workers and are noted with a care for accuracy and detail. They are invaluable proof of the intensity of the work delivered at LAWA, reflecting users' perceptions of the work carried out at the advice centre and the refuge, focusing on specific issues around personal safety, physical health, immigration, welfare and housing.

Two one-and-a-half-hour-long focus groups were held, one with ex-residents and one with advice centre users. The objectives were to document the service users' experiences in relation to specified topics, gather feedback about the services provided and obtain suggestions on how to deal with topics identified by the service. They were conducted in Spanish and translated into English for analysis. Snacks were provided during the sessions, travel expenses were covered and childcare was arranged. The discussions included how the organisation had acted as an enabling agent for women to learn and exercise their rights, building their confidence and providing emotional support. Women's perceptions of domestic violence changed when they looked at their experiences from a different perspective and, despite sharing feelings of isolation, they had optimistic thoughts about their future and were grateful for the help received. The group also allowed participants to discuss common experiences involving housing services and how frustrating this could be, as the process is very slow. Participants felt that people from the Latin American community were not formally recognised in the UK as a relevant group or ethnicity and, at times, this increased their feelings of isolation.

Two sessions of dance movement therapy were also held at a health centre, with the same participants attending each. This approach was chosen because it offered both a therapeutic space and a space for reflection. The sessions sought to:

- explore the themes of transition, housing, experience of LAWA's services, migration and identity;
- provide a space for women where they could relax and enhance their well-being.

Attendance was smaller than expected. Travel expenses were covered and childcare was provided. The facilitator reported a summary of the process and its outcomes. Participants' concerns about transition and housing processes focused on children's needs and well-being, childcare, settlement and adaptation issues. Women also commented on psychological and/or therapeutic and practical support issues, and how they needed a holistic approach to their needs. Discussion around migration and identity brought up issues of self-identity, cultural integration and language barriers. The participants also clearly wanted to show their appreciation of LAWA's services, while welcoming the opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement.

Working with stakeholders: proposing change

LAWA considered the possibility of working with two stakeholders on the housing issues of their service users: the local authority on move-on housing and Family Mosaic Housing Association on improving the living conditions in the refuge. Initially, it wanted to work on move-on accommodation because many women had to stay in the refuge much longer than was desirable, once they had overcome the initial crisis and no longer needed such intense support. The shortage of accommodation made these swift moves impossible. However, LAWA was already engaged with Islington Domestic Violence Project Team and was working in partnership with the council making inputs to the council's domestic violence strategy, so it felt it had opened up the channels it needed to try to influence policy there, although it recognised this was a difficult ambition.

On the other hand, the refuge was where most of the activities developed by LAWA took place and where support was needed the most. Evidence from the user-level exercise had also corroborated this by highlighting the need to improve conditions of life at the refuge. In light of this, LAWA decided to prioritise all its efforts and

focus on work to revitalise its relationship with Family Mosaic Housing Association and improve services and advocacy for refuge users. Initially, it looked to address three specific issues:

- the response of housing services in relation to maintenance, health and safety;
- the house itself, as it was too small to accommodate the needs of families;
- the provision of move-on accommodation by Family Mosaic, as this was not part of the current management agreement.

These initial areas for development were later reassessed and it was decided that, as Family Mosaic's response to maintenance and health and safety had improved considerably, and it did not have a statutory duty to accommodate residents at a move-on level, it was more appropriate to focus on the house itself – an area where LAWA felt positive and realistic outcomes for the residents could be achieved.

LAWA decided to start with a semi-structured questionnaire and follow this up with formal meetings with designated officers of the housing association. The starting point was difficult because the housing association was in a process of merger and undertaking a complex restructuring process, which limited the

opportunities to establish engagement but also potentially impacted on LAWA's efforts to improve conditions at the refuge. LAWA proposed building on past experiences of working together and then interviewed one of the managers by telephone. A negotiation meeting between the coordinator and the housing association manager then took place.

In this process, as with that developed by KCC, the main effects have not been as tangible as hoped. The relationship between LAWA and the housing association, however, was revitalised, which has contributed to a closer engagement between them. The association was made aware of the issues faced by residents, who are also its tenants. Most importantly, LAWA discovered that the association had a very positive perception of the work carried out by LAWA, which was empowering when advocating on behalf of service users and the organisation itself. It now intends to continue this work via regular meetings with the association to renegotiate the management agreement and to ensure that proper monitoring takes place. It feels confident of its position as a high quality domestic violence specialist service and hopes this will serve it well in the current drive to merge to tender for public services. The involvement of users in shaping its policy work has also led LAWA to look for ways to increase this, and also to get its users (and their experiences, in so far as confidentiality permits) to the centre of stakeholder decision-making.

7 What worked and did not work? Three stories

Praxis

At the mid-term reflection, Praxis looked at what had been achieved and recorded:

- a new way of working has been learnt;
- greater awareness of the work carried out by the organisation;
- new ways of recording and gathering data have been adopted;
- relevance of priority setting;
- management of relationships;
- holistic approach focuses on groups as well as individuals.

One exercise got each organisation to work on producing a brochure for the other, showcasing its key strengths and messages. The session recorded some surprises:

- how much work MRCOs carry out for the community;
- the relevance of the organisations;
- the relevance of user involvement;
- the need to learn from each other to tackle brick walls and gain influence;
- the importance of involving the management committee.

By the end of the project, Praxis believed that each partner had understood and benefited from the pedagogical approach, and, as a result, had a much clearer appreciation of what it was, where it 'fitted in' and what it could do.

It was confident that the methods used, chosen in conjunction with each partner, had enabled it to answer these fundamental questions, and that the 'curriculum' developed was one that could be used elsewhere, but that the approach was the vital element.

The project, it believed, had provided KCC and LAWA with an opportunity to reflect about the evolution of their organisations, to realise where the organisations stood, and to develop a deeper or wider understanding of their aims and therefore their priorities. They highlighted improvements in monitoring and the development of a list of future aspirations for each organisation at a final session.

For KCC these were:

- widen services and improve its relationship with the local community and Lambeth Council;
- dissemination of information improved through the magazine and new website;
- management committee involving a variety of experts and with knowledge about the charity sector;
- changes in the monitoring systems were necessary;
- regular meetings with the Iraqi Embassy;
- delivery of messages from the Kurdish community and campaigns;
- seeking expertise from Kurdish background;
- higher involvement of users in activities, especially youth;
- regular service feedback;
- improved promotional and publicity materials.

And for LAWA:

- regular meetings with the housing association;
- collection of service users' feedback;
- improved means of communication with the housing association;
- higher involvement of staff in the organisation's plans;
- more client advocacy;
- users involved in the consultation process;
- emphasis on monitoring;
- develop a higher degree of expertise in the field of domestic violence;
- full involvement in the development of the management agreement with the housing association;
- maximise use of the new database and case studies.¹

KCC

KCC hoped that the project would enable it to 'find out more about ourselves and employ someone to work on it'. It is sure that it worked. It finished the work with a renewed and different sense of identity and place. In particular, it found the development of the baseline narrative a revelation. Writing down its history was a new experience, like 'introducing the organisation to yourself'. KCC, in spite of having started as a cultural organisation well known for its artistic, academic and community events, had not developed a culture of writing things down, and still less of embedding learning. In spite of having employed many excellent people, often with distinguished careers before and after their time at KCC, and in spite of being an organisation that should have embodied Kurdish aspirations in London, it did not have a sense of its own identity, and writing it down made it aware of the breadth and depth of what it was doing.

It also made it realise how much the world had changed. The organisation was no longer a place of poetry and discussion ('people have satellite TV nowadays') but the only place where thousands of desperate people stranded by events across the world could come for help. And they came with high and diverse expectations, which the organisation struggled to meet. One result was a successful application for funding for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) tuition specifically for members of the Kurdish community in London.

KCC valued the meetings and discussions the project relied on, but sometimes found them too demanding of time and commitment, especially as it realised the immensity of the task it had set itself, to regenerate its organisation.

It found working with Praxis a particularly valuable experience, as it saw Praxis as experts in the field, but stressed that they were partners:

[The] work was not done by outsiders but by us and our users. It is important it is inside and not outside. That gave us power to participate and confidence to explore the territory. This is so important and we will keep using it. We were too frightened to do it before.

The training in negotiating was identified as the breakthrough moment for KCC in carrying out the main aim identified. It was able to approach the Embassy, start talking to it and even go to the building, in spite of acknowledging that this still caused mixed feelings. On the one hand, KCC was representing its communities and what they needed and wanted. On the other hand, contact with the Iraqi Government had always been presented as having the potential for betrayal. But KCC did it, because it had understood its role and its power, and this understanding has survived the fact that decision-making on the key issue of travel documentation has now been moved to Iraq.

On many measures, KCC is not actually a stronger organisation since the project ended. It has lost some core funding and staff, and finds itself in a critical period, with many users in detention, destitute and still very demanding. In the wider world, the 'Kurdish question' is still posed. In Turkey (where mention of Kurdistan is a crime), as in the autonomous areas in Iraq: 'the future is

uncertain, but not in a negative way'. But KCC, representing as it did a community whose identity is often denied, believes it has learned about itself and its organisation through Change from Experience. Now, it says, it knows who it is and what services it needs to offer. It also knows what it wants from agencies, like the Iraqi Embassy, that it once feared. It reaffirmed its part in what is going on in Kurdistan, but also defined a diasporic role for members of the Kurdish community in London.

LAWA

LAWA was at a very different point in its development when it was asked to join the project. As the other partners pointed out, it had become a specialist service provider with mainstream funding, but, as LAWA pointed out, this was because it had a strong sense of its identity and role, and had fought for every penny of the funding it now had as secure. Possibly more significantly, it was not a stranger to reflective methodologies. It has a regular business planning process that includes a lot of such work and, since LAWA comes from a feminist tradition of rigorous self-examination via consciousness-raising, and is also at ease with methods borrowed from therapy, the approaches did not provoke any particular surprise.

LAWA's experience of what worked within the project was very different, and clearly relates to its sophisticated understanding of gender and loyalty to users and users' safety. It was attracted by the possibility of deepening its consultations with users in order to improve its services, but found there were significant difficulties in actually doing

this. It found the procedures for running groups overly bureaucratic and was horrified by proposals to film them. This, it felt, illustrated a deep lack of understanding of the lives of its users and the responsibilities it had in relation to confidentiality. The work it did with Praxis to develop a brochure to showcase the organisation was the locus of a different clash. It reported that the process of developing the brochure brought some of these differences to a head and it then had to fight to establish how it wanted its work and users to be represented.

LAWA found the meetings and some reflection sessions less useful, but enjoyed the experience of working with KCC, relating it to the successful partnerships that it had also developed with two other organisations. It also believed that the training on negotiation skills was not particularly useful for its type of negotiation (although it agreed it had included some material it might use in other contexts), and regretted that it had not been trained on focus groups, which it had hoped to use more in future work with users.

In fact, the work with users (the focus groups and dance therapy workshops) went well. The ideas developed in these groups provided LAWA with the basis for developing its work and funding, and these results were used to get a child support worker for the refuge. This, however, was a focus back into the refuge and the lives of women there, rather than the wider policy focus envisaged by the project. That side of things, as with KCC, did not go to plan. The relationship with the housing association has improved, and has probably benefited from the reflective focus on it, but the changes sought have not come about at all.

8 What did they learn?

What did they learn together?

The final reflection session recorded the learning that all three partners agreed they had done.

With regard to the project:

- working in partnership – balancing work done both at the organisation and with partners;
- establishing accurate means of communication;
- gathering information about the organisation's past and history was a hard task;
- establishing priorities.

With regard to the work done with users:

- deciding on which methods were the most appropriate because of the nature of the issues faced by the service users;
- recruitment to and attendance at the activities;
- transcription and interpretation;
- management of evidence and information gathered for other purposes.

With regard to the work done with stakeholders:

- deciding on which stakeholder would realistically produce positive outcomes;
- establishing effective means of communication;
- arranging meetings and setting deadlines;
- negotiating and reaching formal agreements.

What went wrong?

There is no doubt that all three partners believe that they could have done some things differently and better. There is an open question as to whether a more considered approach as to who to involve in such a partnership might have benefited all three, because there is agreement that they did not work well together. All agree that KCC got more out of the processes than LAWA, but also that they learned from each other. Unexplored here, because they were not part of the outcomes designed for the project, are the effects on Praxis, which appeared throughout the project as almost immutably expert – the providers of methodology and process rather than as participants.

Why did LAWA get less out of the processes? On one level, it had less to gain. As already explained, much of the methodology was not new to it, its organisation was not facing a major crisis or turning point and it had already found its way to making effective national policy interventions via coalitions or alliances with organisations such as the local Domestic Violence Forum, Women's Resource Centre, Southall Black Sisters and IMKAAN. LAWA, however, found it difficult to engage with the project on various levels. There is disagreement about why its Director was less engaged than that of KCC, but, in addition, LAWA staff said that they felt that Praxis was both less interested in the issues they had chosen to deal with and not sensitive to the major issues of confidentiality raised by some approaches to the work.

Praxis was concerned that LAWA appeared to want no public story or narrative, but simply to keep doing what it was doing. In particular, it was obviously interested in the difficulties experienced by women with no recourse to public funds because of their immigration status. LAWA had been active in raising this issue some years ago, and currently supplies evidence to some of

the national bodies campaigning on it, but has reached an agreement where it advises such women but does not accommodate them unless they can find a funder for their rent.

LAWA did point out that the work done within the project was gendered – all of the KCC staff and Praxis managers were men (although the project coordinator was a woman). In the interviews, however, there is a clear tone of irritation on both sides – Praxis implying that LAWA ‘ducks’ the ‘big issues’ and LAWA saying that the project managers were not interested in the individual, almost domestic levels at which it chooses to work. What did not happen within the project was the opportunity to tease out those issues (which are not, after all, new – the personal was being connected with the political before either organisation was set up). These explorations did not happen because the two organisations failed to achieve the level of trust at which these challenges could be made without blowing the project apart. LAWA found its trust undermined by administrative inefficiencies and a lack of understanding, Praxis by aloofness and a refusal to question acquired practice.

What did they learn from each other?

LAWA found that its contact with KCC refreshed its understanding of how other migrant and refugee organisations work, especially in relation to culture. The work on case studies also allowed it to re-examine how it did case work, which was valuable.

KCC acknowledged that the 18 months spent working with LAWA had opened its eyes to some of the problems faced by women within their communities and it hoped to develop some work on it as a result.

Praxis has distilled the theoretical gains made in the paper on pedagogy (see Appendix 1). It comments on what was learned from each organisation:

KCC has a huge circle of influence right up to and including the Prime Minister of Iraq. But it is not brought into play sufficiently well. Its intention is to achieve a victory in the

documentation available for Iraqi Kurds wanting to travel to and from Kurdistan. It is an area in which there ought to be considerable mutual interest between the respective governments and the diaspora community, which will take a great deal of delicate and determined negotiation to turn into positive change.

LAWA selected a more immediate and achievable goal. It wished to renegotiate its arrangement with its host housing association. It was looking for a more strategic and long-term relationship, an expansion of provision and a better quality of service in relation to routine repairs.

The two organisations had selected very interesting areas of working with stakeholders and have succeeded in establishing or revitalising contacts. The process of dialogue involves relationship building and outcomes are not going to be short-term. However, there does need to be a strategy within the MRCO and between MRCOs for dialogue. Praxis’ Action Learning events have demonstrated that it is possible to have a very powerful voice when MRCOs are able to work and speak together.

One disturbing discovery in this process has been the ability of stakeholders to disempower. LAWA’s experience of staff changes in a large bureaucratic housing association may not be untypical. Relationships within established systems and procedures of an institution can withstand constant changes of personnel. But the relationships formed by smaller organisations with larger organisations cannot. Too often MRCOs are dependent on the goodwill or personal interest of a key staff member. When they go then the MRCO can be left with uncertainty as to how to relate to the institution. In a situation such as the one faced by LAWA this can be very demoralising. KCC also wanted to work with the Iraqi Embassy only to find the tensions that exist inside Iraq and between Iraqis and Kurds to be reflected in its dealings with the Embassy. Similarly, confronting regulations at the Home Office

is infinitely more complex than it need be. A significant part of the learning is that MRCOs, while undertaking a very important function, do continue to be disregarded in situations where they have considerable knowledge to contribute.

Praxis learned much more about why refugee and migrant organisations find policy difficult and what can be done to make it easier. It stresses that the work done was *not* ‘traditional capacity building’, which relies essentially on a deficit model – that MRCOs have gaps or a lack in their understanding of the objective world that can be remedied by an ‘expert’ organisation. Instead, the work arose from its interest in maximising influence and impact, but, because it was experimental, it was labour intensive and costly. The practical method, however, is one that groups of MRCOs could adapt for use if they were prepared to enter into a relationship of trust and to commit the resources to working on it together.

Later, when asked to reflect on what had happened in the project, the Director wrote:

Praxis has learnt a considerable amount from the process. From the outset we determined that the learning was to be about the methodology. We were testing out another way of working so at the end of the project do need to confess our shortcomings – as points of learning.

- 1. The time-frame for the project was too spread out. It would have been better to have shorter and more intensive ‘bursts’ of activity.*

- 2. There was confusion between research and community development. The outcome was not intended to be a piece of research but a positive outcome for the participants with the methodology carefully recorded. However, the Joseph Rowntree imprimatur and the Praxis lead’s own academic background along with the expectations of participants kept pulling the process into ‘research mode’.*
- 3. There is a need for more advanced-level skills in coaching and pedagogical approaches among front-line staff. These cannot be assumed and need to be taught.*
- 4. There was a reluctance to engage in more creative approaches. Praxis needs to have a broader pool of creative animators. (An issue we have been able to address more recently.)*
- 5. Managing different expectations proved difficult as it was difficult to communicate the process to people who had not previously experienced it. There needs to be a clearer means of communicating the anticipated outcome without at the same time pre-determining the choices made by participants in the process itself.*

(Note written for this report)

9 Is the end the beginning? What can we learn?

Praxis describes the end of the project as not a conclusion but the point of re-entry. 'All three organisations will be changed by the process but how they are changed is the prerogative of the organisations themselves.' It is undeniable that, although each organisation evaluates its involvement in, its gains from and its critiques of the project very differently, all have learned, and learned something about themselves and their capacity as a result of their interaction. Critical pedagogy poses a problem for traditional methods of assessing success because it is essentially seeking to draw out what it believes is already there. It does not create previously non-existent capacity, it makes organisations aware of what it is they have and what they can do. That is quite difficult to measure:

It is hoped that the process contributes to the dynamic creation of human rights of individuals, communities and peoples displaced by external events. It identifies an underused mechanism of critical pedagogy. It engages individuals, communities, organisations, stakeholders in a change process and leads to the revitalisation of visionary organisations.

(Vaughan Jones paper, see Appendix 1)

At a pragmatic level, the core elements in the curriculum developed by this project are there for the taking by any group of organisations prepared to work on them together. They can be described as follows.

- Agreeing and negotiating a common commitment to learning and acceptance of challenge.
- Developing a common narrative of the experience of the MRCOs shared by service users, staff, management committees, funders and key stakeholders, via:

- writing a baseline narrative that includes history, structure, values, context, partners, users and stakeholders;
 - writing a promotion pack for each MRCO;
 - elaborating detailed case studies in order to understand the realities of the life experiences of service users;
 - setting up focus groups and other creative events in order to capture the ways in which users interact with the organisations.
- Through joint reflection, developing a deeper understanding of the policy questions raised by the work of the MRCOs.
 - Reflection between and within the MRCOs and their stakeholders that enables the identification and prioritising of issues and stakeholder agencies.
 - Negotiation with identified agencies with the aim of achieving specific outcomes but also strengthening and developing effective engagement mechanisms.
 - Reflection followed by further development of action.

But the reflection inherent in writing this report poses the key unanswered question. What is the place of MRCOs in service delivery, in communities and in policy development? MRCOs attempted to answer this through Change from Experience by demonstrating their proven ability to reflect on their history, practice and options, create new solutions and pathways to change, and put them into practice. What defeated them was not their own inability to understand, act or engage, but a context in which these abilities were not valued, welcomed or used.

Notes

Chapter 2

- 1 'First, basic needs have to be met. These include material factors such as food, clothing and shelter, but also include basic human rights and security. Second, the need for human association, to have relationships within communities and between communities where different communities are free to express their cultural identities while respecting the different culture of others. Third, people need to be citizens in the fullest sense, and have the opportunity to have their voices heard and their views respected' (Gamaledin-Ashami *et al.*, 2002).

Chapter 4

- 1 Praxis website: www.praxis.org.uk, accessed 14 October 2008.

Chapter 7

- 1 It should be noted that LAWA already does quite a lot of these as routine – for example, in the development and annual review of its business plan – but these were identified as areas for further development or work.

Appendix 1

- 1 Salvador Allende, September 1973, www.monthlyreview.org/mrzine/allende110906.html, accessed 14 October 2008.

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Appendix 1: Change from Experience – a pedagogy for community-based change

**Paper by Vaughan Jones, Praxis
July 2007**

Introduction

This paper aims to outline the theoretical basis for the Change from Experience project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The project involved Praxis working with two migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs). These were Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA) and the Kurdish Cultural Centre (KCC).

Habits of thought, reading, writing and speaking which go beneath meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, mere opinions to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organisation, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media or discourse.

(Shor, 1992, p. 129)

The aim of the project was to:

- marshal the knowledge and experience of the three agencies through the construction of a narrative (telling the story) of the experience of communities at ground level and the web of working relationships with key agencies;
- negotiate effectively with partners to improve process within day-to-day working relationships with key stakeholders and equip the partners to be more effective at advocating for the communities at regional and national level.

The paper will outline our understanding of the application of critical pedagogy as a tool within community development, the human rights oriented value base for working with refugee and migrant communities, the rationale within the processes and methods employed, and the questions that the process has raised.

Why pedagogy?

Pedagogy relates to the strategies, techniques and approaches that are used by educators to facilitate learning. The school of critical pedagogy encourages learners to question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that support domination. In other words, it is a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness. While the term is generally applied to understandings of learning in more formal institutional contexts, there is a long tradition of its application within community-based organisations.

The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, particularly through his ground-breaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), transferred the dynamic of this critical approach from the classroom to the barrios of Latin America, Allende's Chile and revolutionary Angola and Mozambique. It is an approach that has gone on to inform the social work practice of the Third World, expanding beyond Freire's framework to the theatre work of Augusto Boal. It has found an application in preventative work on HIV/AIDS and in action learning techniques in the developed world. It has informed the self-consciousness of excluded groups and plays a significant role in gender and race politics. However, it has, perhaps, been insufficiently valued in the UK.

Critical pedagogy assumes that the knowledge, skill and experience to bring about change is latent within the people for whom change is needed. This is not a capacity that needs to be 'built' but a consciousness that needs to be 'raised'. Freire uses the term 'conscientisation', which clearly has greater coinage in Iberian languages than it does in English. But it is the most crucial term to understand or better still to experience if a critical pedagogical approach is to be adopted. Conscientisation is the progression within an individual, group or community from a lack of control and a sense of powerlessness to a desire

to take control, if not of events at least to the response to those events. The distance travelled is as important to the pedagogue as is the end result. The aim is for human beings and human communities to gain a freshly invigorated sense of who they are as actors for change within an oppressive social order rather than as objects and victims of it.

The conscientisation process requires an encoding of the realities that are experienced by the group in an accessible format. It needs a critical reflection on that experience in which the pedagogue prompts questions in order to elicit illumination. The purpose of the reflection on the world as it is known is to change the world as it is experienced.

Some of the thought processes and terminology of critical pedagogy may sound dated in a world that has become infinitely more complex, with shifting power structures and a growing recognition of the textured nature of oppression itself. However, on another level, it becomes more pertinent. Globalisation is shaping a new reality at both the macro and the micro levels. It is a prime cause of the new London with its diverse communities and it opens up new breeding grounds for regional conflict to be experienced on a global scale. The movement of people at a global level is the leitmotif of the work of Praxis and the two organisations with which it has been working are manifestations of those movements. The fact that the world is changing at the pace it is, in its environment, demography, economic balances and imbalances, political power bases and intercultural experiences, means that it becomes essential to engage with the realities of these changes as they impact on local communities and people directly affected by them.

Praxis and critical pedagogy

The organisation Praxis derives its name from a fascination with the work of Paulo Freire. The work undertaken with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an attempt to apply critical pedagogy to a community work context.

In essence, this is an action learning project, which is a methodology Praxis has been applying to work with MRCOs. These organisations are now established phenomena within the UK community

work scene. They are typically initiatives from within the community itself formed around national origin, territory, kin, faith, gender, sexuality, age, profession, language, ethnic identity, friendship or a combination of these. Characteristically, they are engaged in a range of work, related both to their country of origin and to the problems faced by their communities in their new context (Praxis, 2004).

Change from Experience is an attempt by Praxis to broaden its own experience of using critical pedagogy as an instrument for empowering a voice for refugee and migrant communities. Paulo Freire speaks of the 'culture of silence' within excluded groups. The first step to the alleviation of poverty and differential disadvantage is to enable and amplify a voice.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned this work from its recognition that small grass-roots organisations are players in the migration experience but their voice is not heard sufficiently in public policy formulation. The question posed is whether the experience of these organisations provides sufficient evidence to influence public policy in any way.

Values – rooting community work in human rights

Critical pedagogy is not value free and Praxis itself is an organisation rooted in a considered set of principles. It has at its heart some fundamental (perhaps in our current climate better described as radical) values. The rootedness of the values or ethic is in solidarity. Solidarity itself is dependent on qualities of gentleness, openness, commitment to the other. The purpose of engaging critically with the realities faced by excluded people is to identify with movements to bring about a positive transformation of the dynamics that create exclusion. This stands in direct contradiction to ideological movements of whatever tradition or hue that seek to determine monolithic structures and identifications. True solidarity requires recognition of the complexity of diversity and the difficulties we too often face in seeking to learn from each other.

Praxis' critical pedagogy must be based in our commitment to being a human rights organisation. Human beings are both unique persons and social beings. A 'human right' operates on the interface

between the person and the social. It seeks to define the relationship from something other than a biological or sociological base. The claim of human rights is that, within social stratification, values, culture and power relationships, there are affirmative actions of an imperative order that have a binding character on social relationships. It injects into the interaction between person and society a series of sometimes legally binding principles derived from foundational and intuitive moral instincts. A human right is rooted in conceptions of equality, justice, freedom, self-actualisation and self-determination.

Human rights are not just about the basics of life but also about the essential conditions for human flourishing within community. The right to life is the essential precondition of all human existence. This right is regrettably not automatic in many contemporary contexts. Within the fundamental right to life are the rights to shelter and food, which in turn create conditions for health and well-being. Sometimes rights are seen within a hierarchy. It may be better to see the basic rights as the mechanism by which people progress into more fulfilling lives. Basic rights are not a minimum standard but the point of departure for all other rights.

Human rights are described as universal in that they transcend local taboos and even faith imperatives when those traditions and doctrines have become part of a structure of oppression. Often they provide a creative challenge to the status quo and stimulate development and change. In such a circumstance the concept of 'human rights' ceases to be a legalistic term but a proactive and often provocative agent of change.

Human rights are also universal because they occupy a borderless space. They may appear to begin with the individual but they also depend on a global consensus in favour of solidarity. With human rights at its core, Praxis operates within this borderless space. This poses enormous challenges and opportunities. We are working then where the personal becomes political and the individual grows through community.

Critical pedagogy is adopted as a mechanism to implement this dynamic modality of human rights. It is not merely to advocate a minimalist use of human rights legislation, although we should use every tool at our disposal. Our concern is

more to challenge a cultural, social, economic, political and geo-political order, which is effecting widespread displacement. The challenge is made from a faith in 'human rights' as an expression of an order of human values that transcends the everyday experience of uprooted communities.

As societies become more interconnected, so does the need to relate quite different individuals to societies and systems. Our rapidly changing inner-city metropolitan context is a microcosm of the global context. Valuing diversity is an essential within a human rights approach to community development. Intercultural enjoyment, important though it is, is not sufficient to address social, economic and political discrimination. To do this requires legislative frameworks, which operate at local, regional, national and international level and in the interface between these levels. However, it also requires a mutually understood and valued process of negotiation and exchange, which enables individuals and cultural communities to negotiate space, which guarantees survival and flourishing without impacting negatively on the survival and flourishing of others.

In the contemporary world, such a role cannot be entrusted to or managed by governmental forces. Civil society and social movements occupy that territory. Again it is very dynamic with shifting agendas and priorities. No one should expect radical shifts to take place automatically. Change agents are required and those who believe in these foundational moral imperatives have the right to declare themselves as such within the framework of democratic principles.

So Praxis operates within a dynamic modality of human rights projecting into complex and shifting contexts a belief in some fundamental values and an option for the self-determination of individuals, cultures and communities within a just social, economic and political environment. Praxis also claims the right to facilitate change.

In taking a dynamic as opposed to a static view of human rights, it becomes a driver rather than an objective – a *vision in the process of realising itself*. So Praxis becomes an agent of that realisation. We must avoid arrogantly proclaiming ourselves as the vision or defining intended outcomes as absolutes.

Social transformation

The dynamic model has also been given the name 'transformation'. The metaphor of transformation, while having religious resonances, also describes very effectively both the experience and vision of community work. The term points us to a radical alteration of a context dominated by racism, oppression and repression.

Transformation might imply instant change but it more realistically and concretely entails a series of changes within a change process. A description of what happens in community groups and neighbourhoods that commit themselves to a change process will begin with a narrative of change at varying levels from the psychological to the political.

'Social justice' is the outcome of a rights and transformative approach within communities. It seeks to engage individuals and communities in the full participation of an individual in the total social fabric with equal rights to all others in the society, whether legalised citizens or not, and in a manner that is liberating rather than constraining. The process and method of creating social justice is as important as the outcome. Work with communities that aims at transformation has to be realistic about the dominating forces within international, national, local and community politics. We need to know where to look to see our successes.

Facilitating social transformation

Community workers are now familiar with the methodology outlined so ably in Anne Hope and Sally Timmel's (1984) four-volume *Training for Transformation*:

- key principles of Freire;
- human relations training;
- organisational development;
- social analysis;
- spiritual concepts of transformation.

The textbooks outline a simple theoretical tool for engagement in social transformation. It is a natural process although it has a habit of never being as neat in practice as it is in theory. *Action (1) – reflection – action (2)*, varyingly called the 'hermeneutical circle' or the 'pastoral cycle', is a simple mechanism. Praxis would expand that a little to: *current action – analysis – reflection – dialogue – re-engaged action*. This is the model that has been adopted within the Change from Experience project.

The first phase, 'action', is essentially identifying the action with which the two MRCOs are engaged. In order to understand the breadth of this action we needed first to construct an organisational narrative. Then we needed to engage in the second phase of reflection on the narrative involving long discussions and thought. In this phase there is the identification of key or generative themes/issues facing the organisations and the people with whom a dialogue is required. Finally there is the question of where to go from here – is a heightened consciousness enough or do we allow it to change practice? And, if so, how do we do it?

The importance of narrative

The word 'story' has layered meaning. Originating from both Latin and Greek it combines the heroic 'historia' of Roman accounts of happenings from the upside of history with the more simple Greek understanding of a chronicle of events. The separation of history as fact and story as legend is a development of the Enlightenment.

Postmodern willingness to engage with the fluidity of truth gives greater credence to perception and subjectivity. There are angles and points of view, rose-coloured spectacles and jaundiced disillusion. Events are interpretations not facts. Time is merely a measure not a creator of significance or meaning. The same occurrence has entirely different significance from the perspective of the gay man, or the woman, or the person of faith, or the person of one faith and not another, or the educated, or the uneducated, or the politician or the child. Who is with whom and who is the contradiction of whom are equally fluid in relation to phenomena and occurrence.

This is fertile territory for the critical pedagogue. If history is the product of the people who live it and not determined by the powerful, or encapsulated by academics in libraries and books, then it can be converted into a tool for change. History can be understood as a product of complex dynamics in terms not only of what shapes events themselves but also of the interpretation of events.

Who decides why 11 September is a significant date – Chileans remembering the coup of 1973, United States citizens remembering a terrorist event in New York, Moslems remembering the defeat of Islamic forces in Vienna in 1683 or Ethiopians celebrating their New Year? Who you see yourself to be is a significant factor in determining historical importance. This is anything but an academic question in contemporary London.

History is ours for it is made by the people.
(Salvador Allende¹)

We are therefore much more in control of our own 'history' than we perceive ourselves to be. What happens then if we tell our own story? Creating our own narrative is an important act of self-discovery. There are often apparently invisible dynamics that make us who we are – environmental, physical, psychological.

Western societies undoubtedly veer towards the individualistic understanding of identity. This arises in part from psychologies, but also from the stratification and encroaching bourgeois character of these societies. There remain communities that continue to have a deep-rooted sense of who they are in relation to each other, communal antecedents, struggles and boundaries. The western world derides the 'tribe' but many depend on its structures and norms for their very survival.

In contemporary London, we do not want to recognise a 'clash of civilisations' for very good reasons. But it would be limiting to our desire for a city built on solidarity within differences if we did not recognise some of the deep fissures we all experience.

There is a clash between inherited cultures and cosmopolitan cultural acquisitions. Cultural norms contain deviations that are challenged by the conventions of contemporary societies.

Honour killings and domestic violence may be masked in traditional societies or they may surface in response to the insecurities and threats of a new society and their reception will be different in the new context.

Narrare (L.), the etymological root of narrative, simply means to recount – to tell. However, to tell the story of an organisation is a multi-layered account of facts, memories, feelings, impressions, perspectives, images, sounds. It is a map of relationships and a subset of the history of the peoples it serves.

Telling the story of an organisation is unapologetically subjective and therefore needs to be as collective a narration as possible. Neither KCC nor LAWA is complete if its story is told only from the point of view of the beneficiary, or the management committee or a long-serving staff member.

The story first needs a description of *context*. Events and experiences underlie the formation of an organisation. Social, cultural, economic, environmental or political events interact with human beings. MRCOs are invariably established to respond to a community's desire for change or to the presenting needs of victims. Events change and needs change. The organisations that endure are those that are able to respond to changing need and adjust their responses accordingly. So, in constructing the narrative, it is necessary to record the changes from past to present and points in between. There will be a dependence on personal and institutional memory as well as formal record.

Organisations are formed and continue within *historical* moments. The Greek distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* is helpful. *Chronos* is time that progresses steadily and measurably. *Kairos* is the opportune moment – a particular and distinctive point within chronological time where events conspire to create the need and opportunity for change. MRCOs function within both chronological and *kairos* time. Sometimes there is a mismatch between these two factors. Both LAWA and KCC were formed at *kairos* moments that have passed. The challenge is to identify whether they are currently maintaining a work now established and meeting a continuing need or delivering a service designed for an earlier time and missing new opportunities. This has been a crucial point for discussion between LAWA and KCC,

with different responses. LAWA has established a service out of a historical moment. The need of women experiencing domestic violence continues even though there are changes in the external environment. KCC was formed at a time of intense repression of Kurdish people and is now facing a cataclysmic shift in its external environment. It therefore has a need to revisit its purpose in a much more radical way than LAWA.

An organisation is more than a functioning unit, it also operates at the level of *ideas and values* (cf. Collins and Porras, 1994, pp. 73–6). Many MRCOs are deeply rooted in ideologies and values. This is a factor that cannot be ignored. The root might be a political ideology or a faith conviction. It might be derived from within a cultural identity, especially if that identity is under immediate threat. These values and ideologies are often anything but simplistic. For example, the need for liberation of people whose land is occupied will often express itself within the diaspora as a struggle for cultural affirmation. This in turn will beg the question as to how that culture is preserved. Is it through radical political action or in a conservative preservation of a social order? The ideology and value base may provide a sense of purpose but at the same time they create the dynamics for internecine strife – for example, between adherents of one or other political party, or between generations. This has been a factor in both organisations but has been dealt with differently by each. In the case of LAWA, there has been a focus on professionalism and the adoption of high standards of service delivery, which override community politics and factionalism. If a community-based organisation – LAWA – is to truly serve the women who are victims of domestic violence, it must also create its own distance from the community, which must also carry some of the responsibility for the perpetuation of the abuse. KCC on the other hand is itself a melting pot of debate and tension, which means that at times it is a conflictive rather than creative space. Looking carefully we see that the organisation provides a necessary democratic space for debate and interaction, and has become a driver of change. Debate should not be undervalued in the creation of the ideas that enable change to happen.

Organisations and communities may need to deconstruct their foundational values in

order to enable the continuation of those values reconstructed within a new context. Here the critical question is what is foundational and what is temporal? Is feminism foundational or temporal? Would LAWA work with battered men? Everything in LAWA's narrative tells us that the question need not even be asked – it would not. LAWA is a service for and by women. Is political independence for Kurdistan the foundational goal of KCC or is it about Kurdish survival within whatever political framework? The process of deconstruction has led to a new realisation that 'Kurdishness' will have more than one appearance and youthful British of Kurdish descent may not be expected to have the same aspirations as their parents but still have a place within Kurdish culture and its centre. This has been a particularly fruitful, challenging and unresolved area of discovery within our process.

We witness also an interaction between ethnicity and ideology. Is belonging to a particular ethnic group a justification for a value base within a multicultural context? Part of the deconstruction process has been to ask precisely this question. Should there be a *Latin American Women's Aid* or a *Kurdish Cultural Centre* at all? Leaving aside the external agenda of community cohesion and integration (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007), is the experience of being a minority under some sort of threat enough to justify a particular service? The question is different for the two organisations. LAWA is providing a service that is accessible to Spanish and Portuguese women in London. But theirs is only one model of delivering culturally specific services. KCC in contrast may be able to affirm Kurdish identity only by the creation of Kurdish space. It, however, cannot ignore the realities that Kurdistan is manifested in London where it can claim space only in relation to others.

The narrative must explore the *organisation*, the personalities that shape it, the external factors that determine its resources, the constraints and opportunities it has experienced over the years (Praxis, 2004). The starting point is the formal nature of the organisations. The United Kingdom and the European Union are heavily and increasingly regulated societies. The nature of the organisation, be it as a company, cooperative, charity or some other legal entity, will place

opportunities, responsibilities and limitations on the organisation, as will the service-level agreements it may have with its funders. MRCOs therefore cannot be movements. They are organisations. Any sense of being a movement for change can be derived only from their relationships to other organisations, networks, forums. This is particularly well expressed by LAWA, which sees itself as operating within wider domestic violence forums both locally and nationally.

It also needs to map the relationships it has built within its *sector*. Community-based provision operates in silos. There is the homelessness sector, the refugee sector, the domestic violence sector, the aid sector and so on. This is deeply problematic for MRCOs whose work traverses a number of sectors. The mapping of stakeholders therefore needs to be undertaken through careful steps. To whom does the organisation refer its clients? Who does the organisation need to influence to enable its service users to be better served or its long-term aspirations achieved? Every organisation needs to take care of its stakeholders and this is as vital in a community-based organisation as in any other. These matters are very important in enabling an understanding of the organisation's sense of direction. Many MRCOs need to adapt their core purpose in order to suit the requirements of funders. This is always a more complex process than is frequently appreciated. Some funders have their own mission and targets, and work with MRCOs to deliver those outputs. For others, the support of MRCOs is itself the purpose and aim. But it is unlikely that a funder will have the establishment of Kurdistan as a primary mission. Service delivery is fundable and so there is a tendency for organisations to define themselves within the parameters of funding criteria, which has the danger of leading to 'mission drift' or a clash between the aims of individual projects and the organisation's vision.

The methodology for collecting the story can be varied – timelines, interviews, photo stories, case studies have been employed. Creative arts can play a helpful part. Statistical data – hard facts and figures – are also important (as included in this report).

Consideration has been given to the extent to which an organisation can itself tell the truth about

itself. The question is not posed to imply deceit but the need for real professional judgement. Both organisations have client confidentiality to consider. Both organisations encounter individuals whose status in this country is uncertain. To what extent does an organisation with such a close relationship with a community have the authority to speak of the hidden aspects of the community's life?

Reflection – analysis and action planning

Critical pedagogy is the search for the 'ah-hah' moment (Gatt-Fly, 1983) – that is to say, for the moments of discovery that come from participants. These moments arise within the process of reflection as breakthroughs in conversations or as scales dropping from the eyes of an individual. These are evidence of a shift in consciousness – a different understanding of how things are that enable or rather drive changes in practice.

These moments come through the reflection processes. Reflection for many westerners is associated with personal psychology – new age meditation or aesthetic appreciation. In critical pedagogy it is more dynamic. It takes what has been learnt in the construction of the narrative and looks back at it. The organisation is looking at itself through the mirror. You see yourself as others see you. Perhaps the organisation is too narrowly focused or too wide. Perhaps it has unrealistic expectations. Perhaps the organisation's own self-definition does not suit its everyday routine. KCC is a small community-based organisation in Kennington and it is engaged with a violent and dangerous situation that is shaping global politics. If any organisation is at the sharp end, it is KCC but it sells itself as a local advice centre. LAWA has a root in assertive feminism but its aspiration is for an ongoing contract with Islington Council. It is not a cutting-edge organisation any more but it has broken into a mainstream space that others would envy. Holding the mirror to one's self enables sight of the unexpected.

Those facilitating reflection sessions have to enable the organisation to answer questions of identity. Who are we in relation to the issues we tackle, the communities we serve and the context in which we are placed? What are our

values – what has survived over the years? Does the organisation have more/less understanding or empathy with the communities it works with and indeed the authorities with which it relates? Has the experience of recording the story of the organisation changed an understanding of what it is? Have the motivations within the organisation changed? In what ways? How has this experience challenged stereotypes or prejudices you have/had? What are the strong lessons that have been learnt and, just as important, what continues to puzzle and challenge the organisation? Will the narrative change the way the organisation is structured and what it seeks to achieve in the future? Has the organisation and those acting on its behalf been sufficiently open to the process – have they participated well, been unnecessarily defensive or reluctant to own the consequences of the reflection?

Another step in the reflection process is to examine the small things that the organisation does. Holding the day to day under a microscope is very informative. For example, some casework is dominated by a small number of clients who leave a lasting impression on the worker. Reflection should allow the organisation to see why particular clients are not easily served. Is it because of a complexity of factors impacting on the person or because there is a shortage of provision to which the person can be referred, or is there a legislative barrier to resolving the issue? Reflection can also examine what in the day to day creates frustration or anger in the organisation. What is it that excites and motivates? Does the organisation feel it is failing in some aspects and is that sense of failure shared by others? Did the action taken make a difference – have an impact – change a life subtly or dramatically?

Finally, the reflection needs to look at the organisation from a wider perspective. Does the organisation of the story interact with a bigger narrative? Are the changes made at the micro level of the organisation's day-to-day life having an impact on the global? Given the nature of diaspora communities, this is not so absurd a situation. KCC in particular is part of change on a global level as well as being part of change in the life of an individual asylum seeker.

In this stage of the reflection, the question emerges as to what the future holds? How

do we project the social, political, economic, environmental trends? No one can foretell the future but organisations like Praxis, LAWA and KCC are observers of the signs of the times and become seasoned to shifts and trends. But the key question in this reflection process is 'what can we change?' and 'who do we need to influence in order to bring about change?'

If the ah-hah moments occur then the reflection process will run seamlessly into the next stages. Once the issues that can be changed and the key people to influence are identified then the process moves into an engagement with the key stakeholders.

Engaging stakeholders for change – dialogue

Stakeholders are those people who have either a direct or indirect interest in the success of the organisation. The principle that is employed is dialogue rather than confrontation. The principle implies reciprocity and equality of relationships. It suggests a conversation and a 'talking through' (from the Greek δια-λογος [dia-logos]) a problem towards a common solution.

There are valuable skills that can be acquired in campaigning and negotiation. MRCO leaders need to be equipped with these skills to ensure that they are not put at an immediate disadvantage.

Lobbying and campaigning is also a highly professional skill and it is very difficult to engage with the sophistication and at times Machiavellianism of the modern political process. Political culture also plays a huge role in the lives of MRCOs. They contain politicians, diplomats and political activists but the inherited methods do not translate into the UK context. The traditional small demonstration of angry people outside a building does not work in today's mass media in the same way as a carefully thought out street theatre image. The engagement of celebrities in political campaigns is another example of how lobbying for change has altered. How are MRCOs to construct a new political space in which they can represent themselves?

'Win-win' negotiating is a technique that works as well in the community sector as it does in the saleroom. The dynamics of the negotiation are based on an ability to recognise mutual interests

and potential trade-offs, a capacity to focus on outcomes and solutions, a willingness to propose alternatives and to lay aside past differences. Key to this is the understanding of the power that the organisation holds. KCC has a huge circle of influence right up to and including the Prime Minister of Iraq. But it is not brought into play sufficiently well. Its intention is to achieve a victory in the documentation available for Iraqi Kurds wanting to travel to and from Kurdistan. It is an area in which there ought to be considerable mutual interest between the respective governments and the diaspora community, which will take a great deal of delicate and determined negotiation to turn into positive change.

LAWA selected a more immediate and achievable goal. It wished to renegotiate its arrangement with its host housing association. It was looking for a more strategic and long-term relationship, an expansion of provision and a better quality of service in relation to routine repairs.

The two organisations had selected very interesting areas of working with stakeholders and have succeeded in establishing or revitalising contacts. The process of dialogue involves relationship building and outcomes are not going to be short term. However, there does need to be a strategy within the MRCO and between MRCOs for dialogue. Praxis' Action Learning events have demonstrated that it is possible to have a very powerful voice when MRCOs are able to work and speak together.

One disturbing discovery in this process has been the ability of stakeholders to disempower. LAWA's experience of staff changes in a large bureaucratic housing association may not be untypical. Relationships within established systems and procedures of an institution can withstand constant changes of personnel. But the relationships formed by smaller organisations with larger organisations cannot. Too often MRCOs are dependent on the goodwill or personal interest of a key staff member. When they go, the MRCO can be left with uncertainty as to how to relate to the institution. In a situation such as the one faced by LAWA this can be very demoralising. KCC also wanted to work with the Iraqi Embassy, only to find the tensions that exist inside Iraq and between Iraqis and Kurds to be reflected in its dealings with the Embassy. Similarly, confronting regulations

at the Home Office is infinitely more complex than it needs to be. A significant part of the learning is that MRCOs, while undertaking a very important function, do continue to be disregarded in situations where they have considerable knowledge to contribute.

The end is the beginning

A conventional research project reaches a conclusion. Something of a frustration in this approach may be that it does not. Conventional research informs but only contributes to change processes. Much research is unheeded and much serves at best to support an argument that is to be made from empirical observations.

This project has not reached its conclusion in the conventional sense. Rather it is reaching the point of re-entry. An action learning experience is liminal. All three organisations will be changed by the process but how they are changed is the prerogative of the organisations themselves.

The key questions for each organisation as it moves on to the next and hopefully revitalised phase in its story are the following.

- Do we have a fresh understanding of our context to inform our interventions and projects?
- Are we in touch with the immediacy and urgency of the situations and engaging well enough to impact on change processes?
- Are our core and enduring values still pre-eminent in the choices and direction of our organisation?
- Is our organisation robust enough and our resources adequate to meet the new challenges?

The answer to these questions leads to the answer to the question 'what now?'

MRCOs operate through projects, services, activities. All three partners in this project have begun to work through what the next activities will be – not by putting a finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing but from a clear-headed understanding of their own place in the world

and their ability to influence and drive their own agenda.

It is hoped that the process contributes to the dynamic creation of human rights of individuals, communities and peoples displaced by external events. It identifies an underused mechanism of critical pedagogy. It engages individuals, communities, organisations, stakeholders in a change process and leads to the revitalisation of visionary organisations.

Appendix 2: A comparative synthesis of baseline narratives

Documenting is limited among voluntary sector organisations, often because of a lack of resources specifically allocated to recording, maintaining and sustaining knowledge and information and knowledge management systems. This can prevent organisations from developing the capacity to reflect about their past experiences and create mechanisms that would allow for a smooth transfer of acquired knowledge and expertise to the future. It also impacts on the potential to develop a strong sense of organisational identity rooted in the experience and services provided throughout the years.

The aim of this exercise was to rediscover the journey of the partner MRCOs in order to provide a vision of their trajectory since they were founded, as a means to reflect on their current position and chart prospective development. This exercise also allowed the project team to develop a sense of ownership and knowledge about their organisation's past and its struggles and achievements to date, and to identify its source of endurance. To this effect a semi-structured outline was developed by the project team and each project worker then developed a comprehensive baseline narrative on the respective organisation. In what follows, a comparative analysis synthesises the story from the baseline narratives.

Below is the synthesis written at the time, with some later corrections for accuracy.

Start-up

Both organisations were born in the early 1980s as a response to the needs of two different user groups: the Kurdish diaspora in London and the UK; and Latin American women fleeing from domestic violence. Both groups present very specific needs – on the one hand, the Kurdish community coming from a background of conflict and oppression in the Middle East and in need

of support through the settlement process and their integration in the UK. The Kurdish identity and liberation movement has been a strong factor mobilising membership and shaping KCC's organisation and service development. This has meant that KCC has continued to operate as a typical community-led organisation covering the whole range of needs and aspirations of its members. On the other hand, LAWA emerged as a response to Latin American women fleeing from domestic violence, combining not only the traumatic experience of having to flee with their families from abusive partners, but also presenting the needs of a fairly new migrant community in the UK.

The development and consolidation of both organisations happened when they had the capacity to operate from their central offices, which formally allowed the start-up of their core activities. In the case of KCC, the building where the centre is based was acquired thanks to the contributions of its members, as KCC's wide membership pursued a political agenda in launching this project. LAWA secured a contract to manage the refuge owned by the former New Islington Hackney Housing Association (NIHHA) – now Family Mosaic Housing Association (FMHA). This also meant that LAWA was eventually in a good position to secure commissioning when the Supporting People scheme was introduced. These developments and the possibilities of structuring its work and organisation to meet the requirements of being a contracted service provider offered LAWA the possibility of focusing on its service delivery and to have a more strategic approach to its future plans.

Both organisations struggled during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and have been able to adapt to the new social and political trends. Changes from grant-based to commissioning in the mainstream funding environment also compounded this condition. LAWA undertook a restructuring process towards a more specialised service provider agency in 1995 along voluntary sector structures. The capacity to observe the fast-changing social environment and keep up with policy trends has allowed these organisations to survive despite having to cope with funding shortages.

Aims and objectives

KCC is focused on providing support and assistance to newly arrived and settled Kurdish citizens through the provision of advice, education and employment schemes. KCC also gets involved at a different level through the promotion and organisation of events aimed at the preservation and promotion of Kurdish cultural identity. Because of the nature of KCC's work, the organisation is very sensitive to changes in immigration and international policy in the UK as well as international politics, mainly involving the politically volatile Middle East.

LAWA, on the other hand, focuses on the provision of accommodation and advice for women of Latin American origin who are fleeing from domestic violence. There are very complex psychological, identity and safety issues involved. LAWA has also a social input through awareness-raising exercises.

Both KCC and LAWA share some elements of work. The client group is formed by migrant communities who might share communication support needs, access to welfare issues, immigration problems, difficulties accessing housing, lack of understanding of UK systems and social and gender-related matters. KCC works towards the protection and promotion of the Kurdish diaspora in the UK by lobbying local and national governments, and promoting cultural activities involving literature, music, dance and religion on top of the advice work. LAWA has no specific cultural aims and is focused on the protection of women fleeing from domestic violence who need ongoing support by providing temporary accommodation and a supportive environment. LAWA's input at a social level is carried out through the delivery of awareness raising that challenges violence against women. The community input at KCC is stronger, as it provides a platform for broader Kurdish political issues and organises cultural events. With regard to service, LAWA provides specialised advice and support to women who, because of their personal circumstances, are enduring difficulties at a personal and practical level.

Organisational structure

LAWA was originally set up by a group of Latin American women who were aware of the lack of specialist support services for Latin American women fleeing from their violent relationships, sometimes with their children. Initially employing three women who worked as advisers, it moved from a collective approach to a more hierarchical structure in 1995. This change in structure allowed the organisation to function according to a new set of policies and procedures, thus providing it with a clearer focus and straightforward work dynamics, and clear roles and responsibilities. The coordinator, who reports to the management committee, supervises staff. The management committee has, at various times, functioned with and without specific subcommittees, dealing with, for example, finances, supervision, etc.

KCC, on the other hand, has not reviewed its structure since it was funded in 1985 and it relies greatly on the work carried out by volunteers. The management committee has lost several of its members over the last year and recruitment of new members has been a slow process.

These organisational issues have therefore had a direct impact on the service users and the activities carried out at the centre. The manager supervises KCC staff. There is a management committee of nine members. There are also eight to ten subcommittees focusing on specific activities and providing a participatory base to engage the membership in the KCC's initiatives. As such, KCC seems to be a structurally diffuse organisation with roles and responsibilities spread across the different collective structures. While this seems to have served in sustaining KCC as a community-led initiative, the potential for influence from personal interests and internal politics is apparent. There also seems to be a need to clarify the relationship between the different layers and structures of the organisation, and introduce a strategic approach to enhance its development. This would also go some way in overcoming recurrent funding problems that KCC is encountering.

Services and user community

LAWA's work is centred on the activities carried out at the refuge and the advice centre. The cornerstone of LAWA's services is the refuge, where emergency accommodation, emotional support and general advice and advocacy work is carried out. Demands of Latin American women who are experiencing hardships but still live with their partners has led to the development of a separate Advice and Advocacy Centre, which is funded by Islington Women's Aid. LAWA also has a project in partnership with IMECE (Turkish Speaking Women's Group), which is aimed at improving the capacity building of black domestic violence organisations. LAWA is also an active participant in various borough structures and has worked on the development and implementation of Islington's domestic violence strategies for the last few years, having become a well respected part of the borough's voluntary sector infrastructure.

The refuge provides women fleeing from domestic violence with temporary emergency accommodation and caters for their most immediate practical needs such as benefits, housing applications, children's issues and emotional or psychological support. The long-term benefits of this initial stage translate into higher degrees of self-esteem and confidence with which women are enabled to confront their new life circumstances.

LAWA's advice arm is used by statutory agencies, the general public and refuge residents, and offers advice and advocacy on welfare, domestic violence and immigration matters, thereby enabling women to regain control over their lives and make informed decisions about their future free of domestic violence.

KCC's services are centred around a broad range of settlement and integration needs of the Kurdish community in the UK, and mainly offer advice and advocacy services in the areas of welfare, social care, immigration, education and culture. The centre holds a wide range of cultural events and discussion forums around topics related to the situation of the Kurdish diaspora and takes an active approach to the political situation in the Middle East. KCC has built expertise and recognition among other Kurdish organisations and has supported the set-up and development

of Kurdish organisations in dispersal regions. It publishes and distributes a monthly newsletter, and regularly organises and supports campaigns.

KCC benefits its user community in a more immediate way through the work delivered at the advice centre and deals with more urgent issues such as benefits and housing applications, and immigration matters. However, the centre also has long-term impact as it provides a platform of support for the Kurdish community in general and is a relevant point of reference for those who feel isolated – hence its significance in the creation of social capital and promotion of social inclusion is paramount to the community.

KCC's user community comes from the Kurdish community in London and ranges from very vulnerable new arrivals with poor knowledge of the English language and UK systems to fully settled Kurdish individuals. There are no restrictions on age, gender, status or area. Service users access the service looking for advice and in order to participate in cultural activities, political conferences and forums.

KCC is also approached by other statutory and non-statutory agencies that need support or specific knowledge when dealing with Kurdish service users and other Kurdish organisations engaged in the development of campaigns, training courses and cultural events. Several researchers and the media approach KCC looking for specialised expertise that the organisation has to offer. The events and conferences organised at KCC also attract a great number of agencies and its magazines are distributed among the community and other organisations.

LAWA, on the other hand, focuses on providing short/medium-term support to women fleeing from or suffering domestic violence. The client group is composed of two groups. First, women who are still in abusive relationships and access the advice centre seeking for advice and information about welfare entitlements, rights and immigration advice but want to learn about the options available to them in order to be able to make informed decisions. Second, women who have left their households, sometimes with children, in order to protect themselves and their families' integrity and are accommodated under emergency accommodation at the refuge. These are a particularly distressed group presenting very

specific support needs in the areas of immigration, welfare, mental health and general health.

Interaction with the local community

Both organisations have a pan-London projection, which translates into a bigger community than the community in the local catchment area and, hence, with limited links with other communities at a local level.

KCC provides an advice service and hosts a variety of activities and events for the Kurdish community at its centre in Lambeth. However, its users, participants and visitors come from all over London and hence impact at a local community level is limited. The centre is, however, available for other community organisations for hire. This allows KCC to maximise the use of the centre and also generate some extra income.

In the same way, LAWA's services target Latin American women from all over London. Nevertheless, LAWA is involved in profile and specialised agency networks with black groups in North London, raising awareness among agencies where domestic violence is still stigmatised and the level of reporting is still low because of cultural prejudices.

Stakeholders

KCC and LAWA liaise regularly with local authorities and other statutory and non-statutory agencies, and are familiar with the working procedures of local authority housing units, social services, Jobcentre Plus and primary care trusts. There are, however, clear differences in the nature of their approach to some of the stakeholders. The range and focus of their service packages and the implications for their organisational structures seem to have translated into differences in the range, characteristics and efficacy of their working relationships with stakeholders.

KCC has strong links with universities and researchers, and has also developed an expertise in the delivery of conferences on Kurdish topics and the promotion of Kurdish culture. This has translated into established relationships with media companies in both the UK and Kurdistan.

As a specialist agency, LAWA has established partnerships and holds service contracts with the local authority, the domestic violence team and New Islington and Hackney Housing Association (now Family Mosaic Housing Association). LAWA is also a member of Women's Aid Federation England, which is an umbrella of women's organisations specialised in domestic violence.

Nevertheless, the relevance of local authorities, statutory agencies, legal organisations and housing associations is shared by both organisations as the bedrock of their activities. The range of stakeholders has evolved alongside changes in the mainstream service and regulatory environment, forcing these MRCOs to approach new agencies and learn different procedures and approaches. In the case of LAWA, a clear example of this is the change in the commissioning process with the introduction of the Supporting People schemes. For KCC, as a generalist MRCO, this has meant continuous development of relationships with different MPs to advocate on behalf of its service users. This has required the ability to observe social trends and changes in regulatory, service and administrative frameworks and skills that are not necessarily stated, but acquired in the process and owned by the organisations.

Networks and partnerships

Both organisations rely on a web of networks that allow them to learn from other organisations' experiences and to lobby authorities at local, regional and national levels.

Over the years, LAWA has developed strong partnerships and is a registered member of Women's Aid Federation England (WAFE) – an agency lobbying and channelling grass-roots concerns at a national level. In addition to this, the participation of LAWA in the Community Outreach Programme Partnership led by Islington domestic violence strategy has been central for the development and promotion of LAWA in the sector. More recently, LAWA has taken part in a pilot initiative of the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) aimed at the development of an independent advocacy service.

KCC networks with other Kurdish organisations, refugee agencies and local

authorities, but does not seem to be part of any forums or established networks. Nonetheless, KCC is active and has developed a capacity to respond rapidly to the concerns and interests of its members, and to organise and participate in advocacy, lobbying and campaign initiatives.

With regard to partnership, the development of formal partnerships from a very early stage has allowed LAWA to develop strong relationships with local authorities and national charities. Its relationship with local authorities has been strategically paramount in the development of LAWA as a culturally specific service delivery agency delivering on projects funded and/or supported by different agencies including a housing association and local authority directorates. This has also raised LAWA's recognition, forging its profile in the mainstream.

On the other hand, KCC shows a strong ability to establish partnerships at a less formal level, mostly involving co-operation with several agencies. Current co-operations have been developed mainly to complement those areas of expertise not covered at KCC and to facilitate referral of users. Shelter regularly carries out an advice surgery at KCC, but no formal partnerships have been developed at a local authority level. This could be because KCC is engaged in the provision of a generalist advice service with a pan-London catchment and it would be difficult to develop partnerships with a number of local authorities.

Monitoring

KCC monitors the work carried out by its advice arm by keeping a record of the advice given and the implementation of complaints procedures and policies, translating into monthly and quarterly reports submitted to its management committee. However, it makes little use of a database as a means to record its initiatives. KCC also keeps a record of the events and activities carried out at the centre. The centre accounts are closely monitored and the treasurer supervises monthly accounts and financial expenditure reports.

LAWA presents a combination of monitoring systems because of funding requirements, including the use of a database for reporting to Supporting People, Islington's domestic violence strategic team and Family Mosaic

Housing Association, as well as standard advice monitoring procedures and quarterly reports to the management committee. LAWA also uses specific software to track rent accounts, service charges, arrears, voids (empty rooms), moves within the refuge and Housing Benefit payments. Last year it acquired a specific database to progress, chase, monitor and report on advice work. It is currently developing a database that would allow the monitoring of all of its work regardless of project-specific monitoring requirements. Supporting People requires quarterly reports and also undertakes reviews of all funded projects. So far LAWA has had one review and one formal meeting, and expects another review soon. This system of reporting allows LAWA to keep precise track of developments and the reviews might identify areas for future improvement.

Funding

The Association of London Government (ALG) had been the main funding source for KCC for several years until it was stopped in 2004. This generated financial difficulties since alternative regular funding was proving hard to secure as a result of the wider move from grant based towards commissioning. KCC clearly identifies the reasons for these difficulties and realises the need for a funding strategy and fund-raiser, as this would involve setting clear priorities, goals and defined projects. However, the fact that the small amount of funding available is used to cover core costs means KCC is caught in a difficult task of finding the balance for strategic expenditures. These problems are also related to the generalist nature of KCC's advice service and inability to fully exploit the potential of its premises. These issues are increasingly realised in the reflection process and are now engaging the organisation as part of an initiative to realign it in response to changes in the composition and needs of its user community, and the wider policy and regulatory environment.

In the case of LAWA, during the 1980s, it was funded mainly by the London Boroughs Grants Unit (LBGU), the National Council for Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NCVCCO) and the Department for Social Security (DSS). There was also a complex system of funding from the Housing Corporation called the Hostel

Deficit Grant. Although LAWA managed to secure funding, these were difficult times for the voluntary sector since there was a concerted move towards commissioning-based funding. Throughout the early 1990s LAWA succeeded in remaining solvent, although in some years reserves had to be drawn on. New funding streams were explored and secured between 1995 and 2000, when the Supporting People scheme was introduced. This success demonstrated LAWA's capability to adapt to the changing environment and sustain its initiatives. With the advent of Supporting People – a new system for funding the non-housing services provided by hostels and other projects, which was developed by what was then the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) but delivered at local authority level – LAWA had to comply with the local authority's new requirements, which meant having to devise a new approach to its monitoring systems and accountability in order to

show it was meeting the increasing number of core objectives specified by the council. This translated into strategic and operational changes that have allowed LAWA to have a more dynamic and up-to-date understanding of current funding trends and position itself as a specialist service provider.

The current trend in funding arrangements is increasingly pushing MRCOs towards structuring along standard mainstream principles to increase their chances of securing commissioned service delivery. This seems to create a dilemma for MRCOs since it is the case that, the more a MRCO becomes structured along mainstream standards the higher the likelihood that it erodes its nature and value as a grass-roots community initiative. This seems to be compounded by the tendency to prefer larger voluntary sector agencies in funding circles and the growing competition for resources that may otherwise have been channelled to and/or are targeted by small community-led initiatives.

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