

EWSI Analysis on Voluntary and Citizens' Initiative: United Kingdom

1 INTRODUCTION

Are considered as citizens' initiatives all activities mobilising large numbers of volunteers (e.g. in workplaces, schools, local communities, etc.) to support immigrants' long-term integration and/or open up the public to integration matters and diversity. **These initiatives most notably involve people-to-people or mutual learning activities** matching migrants with mentors, peers or people volunteering their time or space. These initiatives may concern housing, mentoring, child or university-level education, extracurricular activities for children, lifelong learning, language learning, information provision, assistance with public services, translation, job preparation, awareness-raising/advocacy, etc.

Given EWSI's thematic focus, the emphasis is placed on citizens' initiatives focusing on long-term reception (e.g. during the asylum procedure) and integration (of beneficiaries of international protection and/or other categories of migrants), and not on the **initial front-line humanitarian reception for asylum-seekers** (e.g. food, clothing, shelter before entering the reception phase).

2 LONG-ESTABLISHED VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of initiatives that have been running for several years.

1. **Refugee Action** is a charity that has been established for 30 years, whose work is mainly done by volunteers, 22% of whom are refugees themselves. **Volunteers** are involved in a range of activities, including teaching English, hosting fundraisers, befriending people struggling with loneliness and advising on poverty and asylum issues. The group works in six urban regions of the UK and reports that individuals volunteer 30,000 hours a year. In Portsmouth for example, in 2013-2014, nearly 4,000 group sessions were delivered by a team of volunteers to asylum seekers on a variety of practical issues including the legal steps, difficulties with accommodation and poverty.

The charity is also involved in the European Resettlement Network and resettle refugees (mainly Syrians) under the Gateway programme. Although one would expect other partnerships for such a well-established group, none are communicated.

2. **Hope not hate** is a national political action campaign and advocacy project which has been established since 2004, but grew out of an educational charitable wing which was founded in 1992. It works in communities to contest anti-immigrant hostility and bring divided communities together.

Citizen volunteers are activists who assist communities by putting together newsletters for divided estates, encourage voter registration by members of marginalised communities, set up local sports initiatives and encourage community members to take up these projects and run them themselves, often in marginalised areas where there is little history of voluntary and statutory community development. One example is their [Our Cup of Tea](#) campaign in which individuals organise to have tea with someone 'different' to them, and share experiences of the event in local newspapers and radio to spread the message. Another is their TOGETHER project, which is a community organising initiative to bring people together in communities where there is racial or religious tension through developing shared identities and common ground.

The group has links with similar groups in Europe, reporting on the status of far right political support in a range of European countries on its website. It has links on the website to various anti-racism groups in Europe (e.g. Reflexes in France, Demos in Denmark, Vepsen in Norway, Respect Diversity-Football Unites in Poland) and has seen volunteers spending time in the Greek islands this year responding to refugee issues.

Initially, the group was organised as a response to 'politics of hate' in the UK Northern towns, where there had been disturbances in 2001. Since then, it has extended its activity to other marginalised and divided communities across the UK. It reports to have had over 220,000 people involved since 2004 for instance in delivering newspapers and leaflets in local communities or by petitioning and donations. It has 200,000+ supporters on [Facebook](#) and 23,000+ followers on [Twitter](#), as well as a number of high profile patrons.

Partnerships have been developed with other organisations, including trade unions (*GMB, National Union of Teachers*) to campaign against low pay and zero hours contracts, and NGOs such as *Black Country in Motion* to set up a football club in a deprived estate in the Black Country) and *Kalayaan* to improve the rights of domestic workers who are vulnerable through their visa status to abuse. It has a 'Labour Friends of Hope' group, in which local Labour Party political groups can work together with HnH groups in local communities for shared goals.

3. [Citizens UK](#) calls itself 'the home of community organising in the UK' and has various local groups of volunteers across the country. Before becoming the nationwide community organising institution it is today, it was established in 1996 as *London Citizens*, a single city-based organisation, which then became the Citizens Organising Foundation (which is now a training institute which also hosts a network of other campaigns and member groups including mosques, churches, Trade Union branches, student groups and schools to work together). It aims to 'develop the capacity and skills of the members of socially and economically disadvantaged communities of Britain in such a way that members are better able to identify and meet their needs and participate more fully in the society. It works also to promote other institutions' ability to meet that aim.

The organisation runs a variety of programmes, such as campaigning on refugee resettlement and mobilising volunteers (see below). It has led a [citizens' commission on Islam](#), to consider how Muslim communities could better engage in public life in contexts in which they are fearful of being targeted as extremists. Other initiatives include their [Diaspora Caucus](#) programme, to promote Community Organising among institutions and leaders based in the UK who remain connected to their home country. Through training and leadership development, they equip diaspora communities with the skills to tackle social injustice and improve public attitudes to migrants.

It also led in a political advocacy campaign, *Strangers into Citizens*, calling for undocumented migrants to be given a work permit if they had been resident for four years and organised a General Election Assembly ahead of the 2015 General Election. It also powers the *Refugees Welcome* campaign (see below, under new initiatives).

The group was founded after the Executive Director trained with *the Industrial Areas Foundation* in the US. Its spin off groups (Institute for Community Organising) has an advisory board drawn from the global network of its members, the IAF and DICO in Germany.

The organisation has a range of diverse civil society alliances in London (with groups in East, West, North and South London), Milton Keynes, Nottingham, Birmingham, Wales and Leeds. They report that in 2014, 18,740 people had taken action in public life through Citizens UK, 3,945 meetings were held with community leaders and 37 people participated in community organising training. Community Organisers aim to meet 15 community leaders or potential leaders every week to inform their work. On its website it hosts a library of resources to educate, inspire and equip citizens to take action.

The local groups are each alliances of around 20-30 community groups (including churches, mosques, schools, universities, unions and community organisations). The aim of these groups is to bring diverse groups together to create a powerful civil society alliance working with other sectors of society. It works nationally to help civil society groups to coordinate their activities, e.g. working closely with [Migrants Organise](#) and [38 degrees](#).

4. [City of Sanctuary](#) is a network of local volunteer groups, which aims to build a culture of hospitality and welcome to refugees in cities, towns and boroughs across the UK. It began in 2005 in Sheffield, but it was not until 2007 that with the support of the Council and over 70 local community organisations, it became a City of Sanctuary. Since then, over 40 Cities of Sanctuary have been established, with many new groups developing. Volunteers' work is aimed at finding places of sanctuary, helping schools, universities, health and maternity services, theatres, art centres, faith centres, sports, communities, businesses and homes. It links newcomers to these places to help develop a sense of belonging and to find places where their contributions will be valued.

Sanctuary cities are a well-known phenomenon, particularly in Canada and the US. The UK movement focused on national spread of local grassroots action. The number of volunteers remains unknown, but there are 40 local groups in cities across the country. In each local area, the group works in cooperation with local community organisations, yet also seeks the support of the City Council. The groups also work closely with all the major refugee alliances, seeking to build a 'Sanctuary Alliance', to develop a united voice for refugees, although they state that groups should not just build from these existing NGOs, or as a top-down initiative from local government.

5. [Student Action on refugees \(STAR\)](#) is a charity that enables students to volunteer at local refugee projects and to work to rebuild their lives in the UK, campaign, educate and fundraise around the issue of refugee and asylum reception and settlement. In collaboration with other charities, it runs English Conversation Clubs, drop ins for food and friendship and homework clubs where undergraduate study skills are passed on to young refugees at school. It campaigns on access to higher education.

STAR was established in 1994 at Nottingham University by two students and became a registered charity in 1999. It has 13,000 students involved, making up 30 student union groups which are affiliated to STAR, overseen by a national coordinating group and works with over 40 refugee charities and receives funding from a variety of philanthropic donors.

6. **The Forum** (now **Migrants Organise** – see next section) is an organisation which facilitates migrants to come together and organise. They work with many diverse individuals and groups, e.g. Latin Americans seeking more representation, Ukrainians supporting friends and families while conflict going on abroad. The organisation aims to bring them together to find common ground.

In 2001, it developed an Overseas Health Care Professionals Programme for refugee and migrant doctors and dentists to pass their verification exams (3,500 doctors and dentists supported over the seven years). In 2014, it launched a campaign on immigration detention, organising a vigil, a summit in front of 400 people, giving oral evidence in parliament and contributing to the General Election Assembly (organised by Citizens UK) helping to create a shift in the parliamentary consensus on overhauling immigration detention. It has developed mentoring schemes for people who do not speak English and have mental health issues (more than 1000 people have benefited from this support) and launched 'women on the move awards' to celebrate exceptional migrant and refugee women's contributions. They have launched voter registration drives and in 2015 have been at the forefront of a national refugee welcome movement which campaigned to welcome more Syrian refugees.

The group was set up in North West London over twenty years ago to set up shared resources to support the integration of newly arrived communities. It works with over 100 volunteers, 80 community members, 250 mentees and reports 2000 hours of activities annually. It is not clear if there was any international inspiration. In 2006, it joined the Independent Asylum Commission (see Citizens UK). It is supported and funded by a range of philanthropic funders, foundations and local authorities.

3 NEW VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of major initiatives started only recently, particularly since the large numbers of refugee arrivals in 2015.

1. **Ten Thousand Homes** is a grassroots campaign launched by 'ordinary citizens' in 2014, who refer to the events of 1938-9 where 10,000 Jewish children were rehomed in the months leading to the war, and wish to stand up to say that 'we can offer a temporary home' for Syrian refugees. It cites Germany and Sweden as examples for the UK in opening its doors to refugees. It has received over 1,000 offers of people willing to take in Refugees and is now supporting Citizens UK and refers all interested parties to that organisation.
2. National **petition** led by Dr Zoe Fritz on Change.org, declaring willingness to house Syrian refugees, creating a database of those who can offer real practical help, of taking a family into their home for a month, 6 months or a year. Nearly 5,000 people have signed it. Dr Fritz is part of the NRW (see below), led by Citizens UK.

Other new strands of action can be identified as emerging out of the umbrella groups above:

1. **Citizens UK** has convened the [National Refugee Welcome Board](#) (NRWB) to bring together major civic society institutions and groups to mobilise their resources in a *Refugees Welcome* campaign to assist with the resettlement of 20,000 Syrian refugees. It is campaigning for the UK to settle 20,000 refugees. The group request for local authorities to pledge to resettle 50 refugees each, and call on landlords to register to offer homes for resettled refugees in the private rental sector (since they have been inundated with members of the public offering spare rooms, but the rules on the government's schemes won't allow this). An example of this is in Islington, London, where volunteers identified private landlords through mosques who were prepared to let properties to Syrian families at below market rent.

Nearly 2,500 people have signed up to offer practical support to refugees, including volunteer doctors, teachers, social workers, psychotherapists, counsellors and community organisations. The Refugees Welcome campaign has seen 620 local campaigns started and 727 landlords offering properties by the end of 2015. This initiative has been working as an umbrella organisation for many citizens groups, working closely with Migrants Organise, and Avaaz, the global civic movement. It is unclear if there is any international inspiration but there is a similar initiative in Croatia called [Welcome: refugee support initiative](#).

2. [Migrants Organise](#) is technically not a new organisation. But the organisation has rebranded this year from the existing **the Forum**, a refugee and migrant group established 22 years ago. This rebranding was in line however with new, organised ways individuals and community groups are coming together to act for social justice. It is unclear if such rebranding also occurred in other EU or international NGOs. As a group, it provides support for migrants and refugees to develop their own groups, to work together with other groups and to raise awareness. It currently (end 2016) works with 100+ volunteers.

Migrants Organise joined Citizens UK, which was reported to be very empowering for members, especially in their role to end the immigration detention of children.

4 PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

Description and comparison of the profile of volunteers active in old versus new initiatives.

It is undoubted that the Syrian refugee issues have prompted the involvement of new types of volunteers from the mainstream, with some of the newer initiatives actively seeking to engage professional people outside the traditional sector. E.g. City of Sanctuary asks on its website that 'local working groups should be representative of different sectors, not just refugee organisations'. The group aims to develop personal relationships which will lead to greater understanding and support from the host community. Also, Zoe Fritz who set up the national petition is a consultant at Cambridge University and her petition has been signed by thousands of regular citizens, e.g. primary school teachers with stable homes, who were moved by the media images and wanted to offer friendship and shelter.

Geographically, some of the newer initiatives emerging from the umbrella groups are working in areas that are non-traditional for integration work, for example being established outside metropolitan areas too (e.g. in Jersey, West Wales, Herefordshire).

Concerning migrant populations, it is difficult to estimate to what extent immigrants are represented without doing further research on each initiative, although impressions from promotional material suggests that immigrants are still well-represented in the newer initiatives and rebranded ones (e.g. Migrants Organise)

5 INNOVATION ASPECT

Description and comparison of innovative or entrepreneurial aspects of the old versus new initiatives.

Range of volunteers

It could be assumed that some of the newer initiatives emerging e.g. from Citizens UK, or Cities of Sanctuary (post 2005) are attracting a broader range of individuals with a wider professional expertise than the older initiatives, which tend to be more traditional community focused. Also, for some groups, such as Citizens UK, working in collaboration with Avaaz means there is a strong social media and global online community underlying the work, giving it a broader global sense of community. Citizens UK's work in particular is helping to mobilise and organise groups to make the best use of their resources by working collectively.

Approach

Cities of Sanctuary works around 'streams' rather than projects per se, linking interested individuals together in a network with others (e.g. around 'maternity', 'arts' 'destitution' etc. It provides all necessary tools and documents for anyone seeking to establish a new group (e.g. constitution, core principles, logos and design work). The idea of streams is that they are not bound by boundaries (e.g. geographical) but connect people, making it simpler to start up new groups. Its message is also less about 'charity' delivering support than creating a new culture of welcome and welcoming contributions of newcomers.

Transformation

It is also the case however that the development and transformation of older initiatives show innovation, e.g. Citizens UK is working with universities (e.g. Loughborough University in calculating Minimum Income Standard). It has set up an Institute for Community Organising and now created a postgraduate Masters Course in Community Organising in affiliation with Queen Mary University, UK. It is also concerned with wider democratic principles, mobilising larger numbers to call political figures to account. For example, in 2010, during the general election, 2500 people attended an Assembly in London which was considered to be highly influential, committing each potential prime minister to work with Citizens UK if elected.

Campaigning

Many of the initiatives are involved in sophisticated strategic and high profile campaigning, e.g. a Citizens' UK very successful attempt to develop a Living Wage, create CitySafe havens in high streets to tackle street violence etc. Yet other local groups have also adopted more innovative local ways of getting message across, e.g. by putting beer mats in local pubs in Sheffield to dispel myths about asylum seekers.

6 ADDED VALUE

Description of the added value of such initiatives (both long-established and new), including the uniqueness of their activities compared to the existing practices of the (1) state and (2) NGOs.

The citizens' initiatives are potentially different from the State services in aims. A very important aim of some groups is campaigning for active change to current practice and information-providing around refugee issues. This is particularly important in the context of the UK, where there is high levels of anti-immigrant sentiment. Many of the groups (e.g. Citizens UK and Cities of Sanctuary) actively call the government to account through their work. For example, Citizens UK is seen as a third strand in addition to market and state to hold elected representatives to account. In the 2010, general election and mayoral elections in London, the group were active in holding 'Accountability Assemblies'. The groups are also distinctive in creating new points of community interaction, e.g. around shared skills and act to create 'cultural change', e.g. mobilising positive feelings from grassroots (welcome, belonging).

Dependent on the groups, some are less well placed than NGOs to work with immigrant communities and need NGOs to broker contact. For example, STAR is a university based network, and needs NGOs to put the students in contact with refugees; other Cities of Sanctuary movements particularly in less sizeable and diverse urban areas might also involve white, middle class volunteers who have less experience.

There have also been criticisms of some practices that as 'mainstream' organisations they are too conservative and do not go far in challenging the dominant state practices. Some are also criticised as being based on unequal practices between hosts and guests (e.g. Cities of Sanctuary).

7 IMPACT

Description and comparison of the impact of old versus new initiatives.

This question would need more research to answer fully. However, impressionistically:

1. The alliances between groups and NGOs have been important particularly through networking local community organisations and bringing them together into more powerful structures. However, there is some question as to whether powerful cultural change can be wrought by similar like-minded groups talking to each other (the 'preaching to the converted' issue).
2. Some groups' activity has led to State practices being called into account. E.g. South London Citizens held 'a citizens enquiry' into the working of the Home Office department at Lunar House in Croydon, resulting in the building of a new visitor centre and an Independent Asylum Commission to investigate concerns about the way asylum seekers and refugees were being treated by the UKBA. On the other hand, the newer initiatives are somewhat restricted by state regulations – e.g. while there has been willingness by volunteers to house refugees, this is not permitted by the government under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme.