

## Developing communities containing dispersed refugee people seeking asylum

Getting people from diverse cultural backgrounds to work together to build their communities is important for everyone interested in reducing social exclusion. This research, by Bogusia Temple and Rhetta Moran at the University of Salford and colleagues from a range of communities, makes a contribution to the current debates about how to bring communities closer together. Focusing on three interventions, it explores whether they are succeeding in providing public spaces where people from different cultural backgrounds can interact. The researchers found that:

- The area where people lived, or where they took part in social activities, was not the only criterion for defining community, but it had an important role in helping communities get to know each other.
- Taking part in the activities studied gave people a safe space in which to meet others like themselves; it provided building blocks vital for building resources within communities and trust across communities.
- There was a strong desire to maintain traditional cultures and values that were seen as marking communities off from one another.
- Building relationships across communities was defined at the basic level as needing to live peacefully with other communities whilst holding on to their own values.
- The following acted as barriers to cohesion:
  - the effects of racism, feelings of dependency and lack of control over their own lives and the effects of government policies;
  - the differences in values between communities;
  - inability or poor ability in speaking English; and
  - lack of resources and concerns about the sustainability of project activities meant planning tended to be short term and funding scarce.



## Background

This research sought a better understanding of the impact of forced dispersal of refugee people seeking asylum and the relationships between communities in these areas. There was concern that the examples frequently cited of good practice in community cohesion do not appear to be solidly based on evidence. These examples are rarely evaluated and there is often no indication of the yardsticks used to establish good practice.

The research examined the views of people involved in three activities and initiatives. These were Manchester and Salford Community Networks, a Footballers Group in Salford and a project at Manchester Museum and Art Gallery. Community Networks are facilitated by Community Pride and funded via the Community Empowerment Fund. Their purpose is to enable the development of community networks that encourage the representation of local people and community and voluntary groups on the boards of Local Strategic Partnerships and create mechanisms for their accountability to their communities. The Footballers Group in Salford has been running since 2001. The community development workers involved in setting it up have been supported through a series of short-term funding streams. It holds regular, twice weekly, football matches all year round and has occasional residential weekends. Manchester Museum and Art Gallery Women's Health and Well-being Project was jointly run by Manchester Museum and Manchester Art Gallery in collaboration with the Universities of Manchester and Salford and local people who are volunteers and/or workers in arts service delivery in Manchester and Salford. The project ran from November 2002 to March 2003.

The research team included members of the different cultural groups involved and explored whether the activities helped people to get to know others from different communities.

## How people saw the activities they took part in

People from different cultural communities saw the activities as a crucial way of breaking down individual isolation. They valued meeting people from different backgrounds, and the activities they took part in helped them to do this.

“I try to get closer to the way of living here. Using my free time, going to college, library and doing sports can help me a lot. It makes me feel closer to society

and to other people. In sport like football, refugees can communicate with other people and have a good relationship with them.”

(Saleh, Salford Football Group players discussion group, conducted in Persian)

People benefited from taking part in a range of activities in many ways; for example, in terms of personal well-being, improving knowledge of different cultures and improving English language ability. Taking part in activities gave people a safe space in which to meet others like themselves and provided the building blocks vital for community development. Even though most contact in these activities was within communities, the activities provided a safe physical and emotional space in which to meet people who were seen as different.

“I had always thought that people from this country were all horrible, racist people. When you took us to the museum and we met those people, it was good to see that this country has some nice people.”

(Parida, Manchester Museum and Art Gallery discussion group, conducted in Somali)

Sometimes people needed active encouragement to move outside networks they felt safe with; for example, there was concern that football matches should not be arranged according to nationality.

## How people feel about government perspectives on 'community cohesion'

The government aim of encouraging people from different communities to “get on well together” had support from all the people the researchers spoke with. However, they were aware of fragmentation on generational and gender lines within their own groups and thought that ethnic, geographical or religious criteria were not the only important bases for defining community. They felt that their own groups needed to be strengthened so that they had something to offer in exchanges with other communities.

When asked how far different communities should mix, a man from Afghanistan said that this was “just until there is enough of a relationship for them to be able to help each other”. The meaning of community cohesion for people within this research has grown out of the experiences of racism and discrimination. Getting on well with others was defined at the basic level as living peacefully in a way that enabled everyone to continue following their own values and beliefs. Relationships

with people from other communities were seen as an “imagining of different races” that did not exist yet but was valuable to aim for.

The government indicators of ‘cohesion’ were seen as important, in particular those linked with indicators of racism, safety and equal life opportunities for everyone. People working with the two Community Networks felt that it was important to try to influence decision-making in local areas. However, for people seeking asylum, this was an unrealistic aim. Recent government measures limiting where they could live (through forced dispersal), their right to benefits and to work, for example, meant they felt they had little control over their own lives, let alone decisions affecting others in their locality.

### **What are the limits to community cohesion?**

The overarching theme throughout this research was the influence of racism on people’s lives and the effects of this on relationships between groups of people.

“I saw a group of boys... the oldest was about ten. They gathered stones and began to throw them at me... I started to run away from them but that didn’t stop them. After a while, I changed study circles to one closer to my home. I also took my children with me, one of whom is disabled and uses a wheelchair. Whenever the boys noticed me, they started to throw stones at us. One day, I left my son’s wheelchair outside the grounds of the centre; when we had finished, I went out to get it, but it was missing. I saw the boys playing with it, broken to pieces. I was crying every day.”

(Hibo, a Somali woman in her 40s, Museum and Art Gallery discussion group, conducted in Somali)

Many refugee people seeking asylum are not able to work legally, experience difficulty with housing and accessing services, and receive inadequate information about their entitlements. Policies leading to destitution were considered the ultimate form of exclusion from society and were seen as working directly against the community cohesion agenda.

The way people saw their communities and what they felt were the values of other communities also influenced which communities they wanted to get to know. People wanted to hold on to their values and beliefs and not mix too closely with others they saw as living in ways they did not approve of.

“I think our culture is completely different from other cultures. I know people from my country who are very good players and had sports activities for ages in this country, but still do not have contact with other mates from different cultures.”

(Sereo from Afghanistan, footballers discussion group, conducted in Persian)

Everyone also agreed that being able to speak English was important in helping people learn about each other. People talked about lack of English language classes, lack of provision for childcare and the competing demands of surviving financially and emotionally in a new country, which left little or no room for effective English language learning.

“I feel like a prisoner... I can’t communicate with people. I have found somewhere to work, but they don’t accept me; this is all because of my lack of ability in English. I have been to some colleges but they say that their classes are all full, and ask me to pop in again in the next two or three months. This story has been continuing for a long time.”

(Oleg, footballers discussion group, translated from Russian)

Lack of resources and concerns about sustainability for the future meant that the little money that people possessed limited the activities they could take part in, as well as the range of activities that could be carried out. Sandra described her father’s experience of the Museum as an expensive place to visit.

“After the tour of seeing and looking at different things, he wanted to rest and have a cup of tea. He couldn’t afford that, and said he is not going back to that place any more.”

(Sandra, Museum and Art Gallery workers discussion group, conducted in English)

The future for staff at the Community Networks was insecure and the resources available to them were very limited. The workers in the networks discussed the restrictions imposed by short-term funding, relying on contract staff, and, as one worker from the Salford Community Network described it, the “low pain threshold” expected from people in the voluntary sector.

“I think that’s true of the voluntary sector in general; at Community Pride’s offices, they are freezing; there is no hot water. It really is bad when we do reports for

presentation; they have to be of the same standard as the police or health services.”

(Carol, Salford Community Network)

## Conclusion

The researchers suggest that there were divisions and bonds within communities that people wanted to work on that would help them when it came to building bridges across to other communities. “The End of Parallel Lives” recommends that all government funding streams should be ‘proofed’ against community cohesion objectives. The researchers suggest that this should not be at the expense of ensuring all communities have the resources to stand on an equal footing. The activities promoted by the Community Networks, for example, were valued as a way of internally strengthening existing communities. This was seen as a necessary first step towards building bridges to other communities.

They conclude that some government policies work to stigmatise and separate communities, rather than enable them to live and mix together. For example, policies such as the prohibition on working by refugee people seeking asylum, their segregation from the wider community and the levels of destitution that result from the limiting of support from NASS under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act of 2002 do not sit comfortably with the community cohesion agenda. The tension between community cohesion and policies such as the 2002 Act and forced dispersal is at its most acute when people can be cut off from their social networks, denied the right to work and made destitute.

The researchers suggest, in particular, that refugee people seeking asylum should have the right to work legally. Refusing people the right to work reinforces images of sections of society who are dependent ‘scroungers’ who need to be controlled. It also creates tensions between groups who have been in areas for different lengths of time and are competing for resources. It is clear that there need to be adequate resources for areas that receive additional demands for services such as schools and housing, whether there is a policy of forced dispersal or not. Otherwise, communities will continue to see themselves in terms of competition rather than co-operation.

## About the project

Researchers based at the University of Salford carried out an in-depth study of three activities in Salford and Manchester. They used a participatory approach to research to ask people from a range of communities about their views on whether the activities helped communities to live together. People from a range of communities carried out the research and took part in it, including people born in England, Afghanistan, Iran, Somalia, Eritrea and Iraq.

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## For further information

The full report, *Learning to live together: Developing communities with dispersed refugee people seeking asylum* by Bogusia Temple and Rhett Moran with Nadia Fayas, Sysay Haboninana, Frank McCabe, Zeinab Mohamed, Aziz Noori, and Nasima Rahman, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 286 3, price £13.95).

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