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Refugee community organizations and their involvement in the British Asylum system: The Ethiopian experience *

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For so long Refugee Community Organizations (RCO's) have been supportive to asylum seekers and refugees at different stages of their applications. They orient and direct new asylum applicants, support failed refugees and follow up the transitions of recognized refugees to the system of the host society. They advice individual clients based on their experience, support with resources and accompany applicants upon request and necessity. For some applicants the organizations served as starting point and for the others they were an advisory body, which try to repair cases when things were not in the right direction. However, things have changed since the introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and the introduction of the dispersal system the following year. Legal aid was considerably minimized, networking was short cut, funding was reduced if not cut, community organizations role was limited and as a result of this new comers were left with less assistance. This paper examines the effects of these changes on the activities of the communities and on individual asylum seekers based on the experience of Ethiopian community organizations in London.

Introduction

Ethiopian settlement in UK is a recent phenomenon. It was in the early 70's when a coup d'état ousted the Imperial regime that the first asylum seekers arrived in UK seeking the protection from the British government. They were members of the Royal family, a few diplomats and an insignificant number of individuals who fled the during the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. Prior to that a small number Ethiopians have arrived in UK for further education and settlement. However, following the revolution Ethiopians began to leave the country for Europe and the UK. Even that hasn't brought a dramatic change in the overall numbers of Ethiopians residing here. As a former diplomat who arrived in the UK in the early 90's said 'there were very few refugees prior to our arrival. If I count them they were not more than 40'.¹

The situation changed and Ethiopians started to arrive in great number since 1991 when the EPRDF overthrew the military administration and took power. That being the turning point, since then people have arrived here and sought protection from the fear of prosecution. At the moment, according to different sources, there are around 25,000 – 30,000 Ethiopians in UK and the majority of them are living in London.

Why and when Ethiopian started to leave their country?

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One common factor why most Ethiopians leave their country and settle in foreign countries is the political crises that exist in the country since the early 70's. Two major dates are important: 1974 when the military administration (the 'derg' as it is known) overthrew the monarchy and took power and 1991 when the military administration was ousted by the rebellious coalition known as the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took control of the country.

- A) *the 1974 revolution*: As it is mentioned earlier, with the 'derg' coming to power and seizing all state apparatus including the military force, the first group of people to leave their country and seek foreign country's protection were the royal families, senior officials of the imperial regime, members of the diplomatic missions to foreign countries and also very few individuals who were able to leave their country at that moment. Their numbers, as I said earlier, was not significant. But that started to change when the military administration, breaking his promise to bring a change without bloodshed, started to crackdown emerging political groups and chase individuals because of their opposition to the military rule. Most notably because young university and high school students, teachers, workers and other members of the society were targeted by the derg's red terror group, they started to leave their country to save their lives. Although there was an influx of people from Ethiopia and Ethiopians were leaving their country in a number of ways (as people used to say either through 'Bole' or through 'Bale' – some were using their post to go out for a mission and stay there and apply for asylum in the country they arrive and the others were using the long way to Kenya through the province of 'Bale' sometimes with cars and on foot the last journey to the border of Kenya) few were able to reach Europe at this time. Thus most Ethiopians were settled in neighboring countries like Sudan and Kenya and from there they used the UNHCR program to reach Western countries
- B) *1991 and after*: 1991 was a turning point in Ethiopian immigration history. EPRDF, a consortium of ethnic based political group removed from power the Mengistu regime and started to reshape the country on ethnic lines. That has caused a considerable resistance from the people of Ethiopia and significant number of people started to stand against the new administration's policy. The unrest deepened when the government paid little attention to the national unity of the country or no practical action was taken to the reconciliation of different groups, demobilized the country's well organized by African standard military force and exposed the country to danger etc. These and other measures taken by the new administration being the main factors, people started to use their democratic right and express their concern. Because the government was not willing to listen to their disquiet, it started to crack down the groups of people and jail and kill individual leaders of movements. In line to this the 1993 Addis Ababa university crackdown and so many actions against civilians taken by the administration in Arsi, Debrebrehane, Gonder, Awasa, Gambella and other places can be mentioned among others.. This has become a reason for so many Ethiopian to leave their country. Again the collapse of the unity between The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the one time member of EPRDF, and other member of the consortium on issues of group interest has also

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contributed to the immigration of many OLF members. Then after came the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 and the split within the TPLF and most recently the 2005 election and the action taken by the government in the aftermath of the May 2005 election, which can be mentioned as one of the major reasons for Ethiopians to leave their country and seek the protection of foreign countries. The fall down of the socialist camp during this period has also contributed to the influx of Ethiopian asylum seekers to the western countries as there were so many Ethiopian students in many former socialist countries. What is specific to this period is that people started to use their individual and group network to go beyond the neighboring countries and try to settle in Europe and US. In UK most of them are settled in London and there are some in like Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool.

Ethiopian Community Organizations in London

For Ethiopians settling in the UK was not easy especially for those who arrived first. Most were not aware that they should go through the asylum seeking process and they do not know from where to start. There was no one to give them information and they do not know the existence of services to support their settlement. Even those who have been for a couple of years to study in the UK were not aware of the existence of supporting institutions. There was also the cultural problem that hindered the Ethiopians from approaching and seeking the support of the others. I talked to one of the first Ethiopians to arrive in UK in 70's:

‘ I was among the first of a trickle of Ethiopian immigrants to have arrived from Ethiopia post 1974 revolution in this country. Being the first we had to resort to our own means of survival. ... we knew nothing about basic statutory entitlements such as social security benefits or the application for asylum or how to go and ask about the accommodation and housing benefits.’²

Although they managed to process their asylum cases, that was not an ideal way for the others to follow. On individual level also supporting new comers in filling their asylum applications and showing the way to the Home Office can be done for some but not always and not for all and that was not seen as lasting solution to the problem. It was this desperate situation that pushed them to the idea of organizing a community association. It was understood that rather than trying to support individual asylum seekers and wasting more time on one applicant, it is better to look for ways so that a community can support these new asylum seekers in processing their applications. It was not easy and with the support of some other Ethiopians and the African Refugee Housing Group, the group that initiated the idea managed to form the first Ethiopian Community in Britain (ECB) in 1984. Since then many Ethiopian community organizations were formed and at the moment there are some 35 Ethiopian community organizations in London (see table 1& 2).

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Table 1 - Year of establishment

a) Before 1990	6
b) 1991 – 2000	11
c) 2001 – present	12
d) Unknown	6
Total	35

- **The oldest community has been since 1984 (23 years) and**
- **The youngest community is not yet one year (since November 2006)**

Table 2 - Orientation

a) Ethnic Oriented	4
b) Profession Oriented	6
c) Religion Oriented	5
d) Gender Oriented	1
e) General	19
Total	35

Despite some common objectives they share in providing service to the wider community there are differences among community organizations. Some of the differences are on the essence of the objectives and the trend the community organization have developed, the others are on organizations potential, resource, experience and the network and also the community organization's orientation. Based on these and other factors community organizations can also be set into two main groups:

- 1) those established before 1990 and
- 2) those who are formed after 1991

Community organizations established before 1990: the core aim of the communities established during this period is supporting asylum seekers. They are problem driven gatherings intended to solve and support the new applicants. Asylum seekers of that period in addition to the information they need, they were also requiring support in health related matters, moral and spiritual support and also support on ethnic related issues. One of the community organizations established during this period was the Ethiopian Community in Britain (ECB). The community organization was formed in 1984 with a handful Ethiopians effort. The main objective of the community organization was to support new comers and offer them with necessary information. According to one of the organizers the formation of the community was driven from the actual necessity of the time. He said:

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‘ Basic information was lacking and it was this desperate need that made us take the initiative. We managed to apply for political asylum, and then after we took the responsibility and commitment to ensure subsequent arrivals did not have to go through what we had to endure.’³

After consulting like minded Ethiopians, the group wrote the first constitution and brought it for the discussion. The draft was discussed on the founding assembly, where 120 people were present. Amendments were brought to it and the first leaders were elected. The formation of this community organization was not without doubt and concern as some Ethiopians expressed their fear that the formation of the organization may lead to fragmentation among Ethiopians. However with 80% support of the attendants the community organization was created and since then it is working as one of the oldest Ethiopian community in UK. Through out these 23 years the community organization has developed to an institution with organized working facility (it has got its own building – full rent is paid by the local authority, working offices, meeting halls for bigger and mini gatherings and a restaurant) paid staff (2 full-time and 4 part-time) and inviting working atmosphere. The work experience of the community has also developed where they managed to help new comers and failed asylum seekers. One aspect of the community’s activity that should be mentioned at this point is the service the community has given to new comers at the request of the Home Office through the Refugee Council. With the implementation of the 1999 act and the dispersal programme, 5 communities including ECB were selected to support new comers in an introductory service till they were sent to their dispersal sites. New comers were from different countries and main task given to the communities was orienting the procedure they are going to follow, networking them with solicitors and following their appointments and other relevant cases to the asylum procedure. The community organization has done this for 4 years until the programme was terminated and the NASS became in charge of the task.

Community organizations established after 1991: the community organizations formed after 1991 form majority among the Ethiopian community organizations (23 out of 35). Basically the main objective for most of the community organizations of this period, as those established before them, was to support members. Specific to this period community organization is a change in the nature of the service and the increase in the type of the service with some profession oriented provisions added to the communities activities. Thus community organizations of this period either started to incorporate multiple activities in their service such as having political affiliation incorporated with their community activity outlined or organize specific profession oriented community organizations. The other dimension observed with in this period is the shift of community organizations from service centre of all to interested group working institutions. One of the community organizations organized during this period was the Ethiopian Community Centre in the United Kingdom (ECCUK).established 1994 with the objective of supporting new asylum seeker. The coordinator and one of the founders of the organization say;

‘ It just started from nothing.. There was even lack of information and we were not aware enough about the difficulties ahead. The only thing we had at that time was the desire to do something. The time was also very crucial as the

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1996 legislation was introduced against asylum seekers arriving without documents and there were many new-comers who were left without shelter and support. So we wanted to help them and that was the source of our motivation'.⁴

This community that started with few interested groups and volunteers has changed dramatically and it has been transformed into a multi-ethnic professional institution serving different ethnic groups. Within this 13 years it has become the only Ethiopian community Organization with 25 paid staff, 50 volunteers and almost half a million annual turn-over. The organization runs 17 different projects incorporating services of asylum seekers and refugees (legal support, interpreting service, health issue orientation), integration related services (language and IT training), media service (weekly radio programme for Ethiopians in London and the surrounding areas), research design and follow up (conducting research in corporation with higher institutions on issues of refugees) and support in family reunion efforts of refugees. One main area where the ECCUK is active differing from the others is that the effort made by the community organization to organize regional office so it can support new comers placed outside London within the dispersal programme. So far they have regional offices in Birmingham and Leeds and they are preparing to have branches in Manchester and Liverpool.

Another recently formed (November 2006) refugee organization, the Ethiopian Refugee Support Association (ERSA) also falls with in this category with more or less similar objectives but different way of implementation. The organization is established or supported by in large with failed asylum seekers and sees as its main objective organizing practical actions to support the failed asylum seekers and those who are in the government's list of deportation. The initiative got momentum, according to one of the founders, when other communities lacked practical initiatives to organize sustainable actions in support of these vulnerable people. In the absence of one or more take responsible body, the initiative takers seized the task of coordinating a community organization, networking with other organizations, supporting with relevant resources and following up individual cases before they fall in the process of deportation. With no fixed work place, no financial support even for literal paper work and no practical support from other senior communities, the organization is taking significant steps in consolidating its network among the British like-minded groups such as anti-deportation committee, Amnesty International etc and among the wider fellow Ethiopians. That was observed on their recent gatherings.

Main activities and common features of Ethiopian community organizations

A) *Main activities:* As the table 1 show only 6 communities were formed before 1990 and since 1991 that figure has increased dramatically. I do not think this is the last figure for the number of Ethiopian refugee communities in London as there are new organizations still emerging. Table 2 shows the community organizations orientation according to their objectives. From my discussion with community organizations I have concluded that the activities of the organizations can be categorized as follows:

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- 1) Serving as information / resource centre;
 - Information on initial asylum seeking procedures, appeal stages and resources on issues of asylum seeking and refugee matters,
- 2) Advising on welfare issues;
 - Income, child or housing benefit issue; Jobseeker allowance or health related issues etc,
- 3) Orienting about and directing to the labour market;
 - IT training, English language course, job application methods and interview techniques etc,
- 4) Legal support mostly referral to the legal firms;
 - networking and mediating (when necessary and upon request) between the clients, lawyers and institutions,
 - Interpreting services,
 - Translating documents,
 - Accompanying clients to Home Office, Solicitors or Courts,
 - Supporting in family reunion procedures etc.
- 5) Professional support;
 - Health support,
 - Academic / business oriented support,
- 6) Religious support;
 - Spiritual and moral support,
- 7) General
 - Running mother – tongue lessons and supplementary classes for the children
 - Organizing socio-cultural events etc

B) *Common specific features:* From the communities I have got the chance to observe and the discussions I have made, the following specific features of the Ethiopian community organizations can be portrayed:

- Most communities take supporting members in their transition from their homeland way of life to new culture and system as one of their main tasks. This includes the legal process of the asylum seeking stages with its difficulties, routines and the adaptation and integration process with its different dimensions.
- Membership to organizations very selective (especially for those communities formed after 1991) based on the objectives of the community organization; it can be religious, professional, gender oriented or general besides the ethnic-minority identity the community reflects. One can also observe the semi-open nature of the community organizations activity.
- Informal and kinship oriented contacts are more practiced and acceptable with in the wider community organizations. For instance meetings can be successful if organisers approach individual members informally than sending a formal letter; projects can get the support of the community members if the leaders have strong link to a group or ‘dominant’ figure within the community members etc.

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- Very few women are active in leadership position unless organized for the wellbeing of women. So it can be said that by in large they are male-dominated gatherings (so far 2 women are working as coordinator of a community, one being volunteer for a women's group.,
- In most cases membership obligations are not taken seriously while the demand from the community's organizations and their leaders is increasing. Members also do not attend meetings regularly and majority of them do not pay their membership fees.
- In most cases community organizations are dependent on short-term funding which contributed to the instability, insecurity, short-term plan and exposed the communities to weak management and administrative structures etc.
- There is a personal interest attachment to the formation of the community organizations or in taking the task and the responsibility of the communities. Such recent development has changed most refugee communities to gatherings of interested groups rather than being a common place of the represented community members.
- This in turn has shifted or changed the representation, status and accountability of refugee community organizations as in most cases the leaders do care for the paper work they submit to their grant providers by marginalizing the very interest of the members.
- Majority of them are charity oriented and registered with in the Charity Commission.

The effect of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act community organizations and individual asylum seekers

One of the legislations introduced and that has got so much effect on refugee community organizations and individual asylum seekers is the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act put in practice since year 2000. Following this was the dispersal programme for new asylum seekers where accommodation and other primary services were arranged outside London under the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Under this programme, asylum seekers upon arrival will be placed in an induction centre where they go through initial screening process and then sent to dispersal sites outside London. However, As Griffith and others (2005, 2006) and Hynes (2006) have expressed their concern, significant problems were and there were shortcomings of the dispersal programme. On the other hand the increase in size of new asylum seekers and refugees outside London has created a possibility of organizing new community organizations in the regions. This might be seen, as Griffiths and others (2006) indicated, as the most significant outcome of the dispersal programme. It is true that asylum seekers and refugees have started to come together to form an organization that supports them in their asylum seeking process. But at this stage, from the discussions I had with the Ethiopian community organizations in London, they are not capable of delivering the type of services that the communities in London

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are delivering and they are not organized in most dispersal areas as there are few asylum seekers from one country. The second point that should be understood here is in practice community organizations have limited legal support tasks under the dispersal programme and they are not in a position to help new or failed asylum seekers in legal terms where there is a huge problem. Actually my discussion with the Ethiopian Community organizations in this regard was not on the principle of the dispersal programme as most of them are not against the programme. It rather was on its implementation and its effect on the activities of the refugee community organizations and on individual asylum seekers in particular. Notwithstanding the direct or indirect effect the programme has brought on the refugee community organization activities, according to them, it is individual asylum seekers who have been most affected from the implementation of the dispersal programme. The following 3 areas of disquiet were raised as their concern: the problem with the choice of the dispersal site, the problem with social network and the problem of legal support and interpreter services.

A) 'Even there is no off-licence to get the very primary things'

Asylum seekers have been sent to areas where no one is from their community or where there are very few asylum seekers in the area. The sites are highly deprived with high rate of unemployment, no or very few common services with no or very little support from the local communities. A practical example of such a situation is the story of Mr. G.

When he first arrived in UK he went through the asylum application process and after his first screening interview he was sent to local area Y within the dispersal programme while his lawyer was in London. In his description the area he was sent was a small community where everyone can easily be identified. At the moment of his arrival there were around 20 Ethiopians and Eritrean in the surrounding area but the house he was given was outside that centre among the local people where there are no or very few services. Even there is no off-licence to get the very primary things. He was placed with someone at the beginning but the gentleman got his recognition and left to another area as soon as he arrived leaving him alone. So if he wants to meet someone he must come to the local centre by bus or on foot. The weekly bus pass costs £16.00 which takes almost 50% of his weekly payments (it was £35.00 per week). Otherwise he must walk more than one hour to come to the centre and the same time to go back. After sometimes he learned from others that there exist a free room in one of the accommodations in the centre and applied for a transfer to that free room but he was told by the local coordinator that the decision on his request for the transfer will be made in London NASS and he must wait until the decision is made, which was not made till he left the area. Because he was very far from his lawyer he was unable to talk to him frequently or follow the progress of his claim and once when he was given the chance (he was given transport ticket) to London to meet his lawyer it was for very short time because, a) the lawyer was busy with so many clients and he must wait for his turn; b) when he gets his turn he must do it quickly and leave for his train as he has long journey ahead of him. Unless he reaches the local

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centre to his place on time he can not get a bus to his place as the buses around that local area stop services early. He did his substantive interview in Liverpool and the ticket sent for him was with specific travel time with only 30 minutes gap between the interview time and his arrival time to the main station. According the map sent to him there was also a 20 min. walk to the exact appointment place after his arrival at station which he did manage to do it by running and asking people. He was called to the interview with no rest from that running⁵.

B) *‘Most applications are unsuccessful not because they do not have convincing evidence ... because they have not been given enough time to prepare’*

According to organization leaders, asylum application starts with appropriate preparation. After arriving in UK new comers are exposed to different types of lifestyle, ways of communication, environment and surroundings. In particular for those coming from countries like Ethiopia the cultural shock they confront is not easy it can be imagined. Hence new comers need time to reflect, organize their cases and be supported with resources and supplementary documents before they process their claims. That is an important step before anything else and that is what the community organization has been doing for the past many years. Here is what a coordinator of one of the oldest Ethiopian community organization has said:

‘... most applications are unsuccessful not because they do not have convincing evidence for their cases. It is because they have not been given enough time to prepare themselves and they were not well supported before they start the next step. Escaping a regime by itself is a burden and crossing so many borders and reaching UK is another. There is also a traumatic event they have gone through which is still running in their mind and that needs time and space to be replaced by good once. In addition to all these the new country with its complex system makes them inferior and that affects their presentation.’⁶

Such was the experience of the community organizations in supporting new asylum seekers before they start to process their applications. In the course of the asylum process also newcomers were supported and oriented by fellow Ethiopians and the community organizations. Actually this is not a single day practice or a one-off show but it is a process that develops and expands in every single day. The social network developed in such a way has been crucial through out the process in supporting asylum seekers in their emotional, psychological and spiritual life. With the dispersal programme in place asylum seekers started to loose that network and were left for loneliness. This was the idea shared by Refugee Arrival Project team leader⁷. According to him, upon arrival newcomers know nothing or very little how the system works in this country and yet they are sent outside London where there are very few or no Ethiopians to orient and help them. They will be there without supporting social network in place and I think that has been given little attention in the course of the dispersal programme.

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C) If cases get recognition; it is only because of the good legal support the case has got at the beginning.

The dispersal programme has also contributed to the interruption of contacts between legal representative and the client's contacts and that in its turn has contributed to so many negative outcomes. In most cases, as refugee community organizations indicate, individual asylum seekers are sent to dispersal sites while their legal representatives continue to represent them from London which creates a gap in communication. The time they spend before the client leaves to his area is not enough and no subsequent arrangements will be done to revive that line of contact. As a result of such inadequate preparation from the beginning and less attention to follow the case, applications will end up in negative outcome. One of the profession oriented Ethiopian community organization coordinator has expressed his concern as follows:

‘... I have the opportunity to see some 10-15 cases and you see contradictions in essence, preparation and follow up. Preparation of cases and preparing the clients was poor or given less attention. If cases get recognition it is only because of the good legal support the case has got at the beginning. Lawyers sometimes do not follow the dateline or give little time for the appeal process and clients suffer because of such neglect’⁸.

Such complain does not reflect the general picture of the Law firm's huge tasks and the efforts of individual solicitors as there are legal firms and solicitors who take cases seriously. Communities do also recognize such efforts and give their appreciation to the law firms and individual solicitors for their professional support to their community members. ‘There are, of course, very genuine and hard working solicitors. I have met also good barristers capable of winning cases when ever they are in charge of it’, was the suggestion of one of the community coordinator. In addition to this community leaders acknowledge also the less preparation that clients show in presenting their cases. Regardless of the traumatic situations they have gone through and the many problems they have encountered, asylum seekers must prepare themselves and support the legal representatives in providing sufficient information and documents. That is the idea most community organizations share.

Discussion

The introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and its implementation has changed in the way refugee community organizations operate. The Act has limited their activity in legal aid and also interrupted the social network existed long before and used by many in processing their applications. The role community organizations played during that period was significant as they offer support in resource, orient how the system works and direct to solicitors and accompany them to different places when that is requested. At individual level also Since the introduction of this act new asylum seekers submit their applications with out the support of their community organizations or friends and without supplementary documents and in most cases they fail to satisfy the authorities and they will be categorized to failed asylum seekers. According to their account, most asylum cases fail not only because they are not genuine in their arguments but because they were not given enough time

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to prepare for their applications, they were not given proper legal representation and above all asylum seekers were left without the support of their community organizations.

In addition to this the dispersal programme has been a cause for secondary migration. One of the objectives of the Dispersal programme was to accommodate as many asylum seekers as possible outside London and overcome the growing number of accommodation problems in London and the South East. However, because of the structure, the geography and the process of the dispersal programme, asylum seekers leave their dispersal sites and shift to different places where they can get support of their community organizations that can be seen as a cause for secondary migration. (*Informant 'G' for instance left his site in year 2005 and since then he is in London*). Thus as Hynes (2006) indicated NASS has created the impulse for asylum seekers to secondary migrate in order to rejoin their nearest to them families or friends that show the programme hardly met its objective.

Conclusion

From the experience of the Ethiopian community organizations I can say that refugee community organizations have been instrumental in supporting asylum applicants in processing their claims. They have oriented the new comers and networked them to legal representatives, they have organized the interpreter services and translated documents, they have mediated any misunderstandings between institutions and asylum clients and they have also played a part in integrating settled refugees by organizing trainings of different types. This was their initial idea when the first organization was set up some 23 years ago and that is still the idea behind the newly formed refugee support organization set up some months before. But things are not the same as it was some years back. Changes have been observed with regard to the attention to the vulnerable people as organized communities shifted their activities and developed to professional services and the very first idea of defending and supporting asylum seekers and refugees was marginalized or left without responsible body. The introduction of the dispersal programme that limited the service of the refugee community organizations has also worked against individual asylum seekers in this regard.

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- ¹. Note from the interview taken on 13/04/07
 - ². Note from the interview taken on 06/06/07
 - ³. ECB especial issue , p. 5
 - ⁴. Note from the interview taken on 07/01/07
 - ⁵. Note from the interview conducted on 07/06/07
 - ⁶. Note from the interview conducted on 21/12/06
 - ⁷. Note from the interview taken on 20/03/07
 - ⁸. Note from the interview taken on 02/05/07