

Guest Editorial

Guest Editorial: Twentieth Century Histories of Civic Society Responses to Crises of Displacement

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It is our pleasure to introduce Volume 2 Issue 1 (Summer 2021) of *Displaced Voices*. This is a special issue to mark the 70th anniversary of Refugee Council, one of the primary not-for-profit organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. Charities like Refugee Council and other voluntary organisations have worked to meet the practical demands of providing a safe haven for those who seek it in the United Kingdom, part of the vibrant voluntary landscape of modern Britain. From the selection of those who would be welcomed into Britain, their reception and arrival, ongoing work for refugees' welfare, education, employment and housing in Britain, to, later in the period, explicit campaigning for the rights of refugees and for governments to change their policies on refugees and asylum seekers, charities like Refugee Council, the Ockenden Venture, Save the Children Fund, Refugee Action, Christian Aid and others have been at the heart of designing and providing sanctuary.

The Refugee Council emerged from the merging of two organisations, the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR) and the Standing Conference of British Organisations for Aid to Refugees. Both of these organisations take their start date as 1951, the year when the UN charter on the rights to refuge was established, when the International Refugees Organisation closed, and the newly formed United Nations High Commission for Refugees took over. The charity today views itself as a direct response to the charter, the national British response to an international moment, which still provides the anchor for [the Council's work](#). As Dame Anne May Curwen - at the heart of the BCAR's activities for its first two decades - wrote to member organisations in a letter in September 1950,

Here is a challenge to the voluntary societies of this country with their tradition of humanitarian service. We have gained as a nation by having the help of many displaced persons in our industrial drive. Let us see if we can absorb (this group of DPs) ... and make them happy members of our community.

Over its seventy-year history, the Council's work has seen multiple changes in the work it has undertaken and the constituents it has served: the move from a broadly European focus to necessarily more global arrivals; mass resettlement schemes and individual arrivals; shifting government attitudes to refugees and the state's responsibility for them, from housing to healthcare; and the rise of a restrictive immigration regime.

This has not been without struggle or challenge. The archives of Refugee Council, held in the Refugee Archives at the University of East London, offer a litany of difficulties and complaints about how the settlement of refugees has taken place, not least from the perspective of refugees themselves. The rise of refugee community organisations, run by refugees for

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refugees, working collaboratively, in critical tension or in competition (for increasingly smaller pots of money) with the larger agencies, recognises the expertise of experience and of communities building themselves.

The articles in this issue take up the theme of voluntary organisations support for refugees, from the local to the national, interrogating how volunteer and community work at various scales has the potential to support refugees, to build understanding and solidarity, and to develop connections between historically disparate refugee arrivals. In Refugee Week, this issue raises new questions about what it means to organise for refugees and the role and responsibilities we all hold.

*Disclaimer: The Refugee Council had no role in selecting the papers for the journal and the content does not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.