

The Assisted Voluntary Return Programme in UK: How does the receipt of government funding impact on the relationship, advocacy and independence of the refugee sector ?

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Tried & Trusted? The Research

- Joint Project – CPC, University of Southampton & COMPAS, University of Oxford
- 'insider perspectives' on the relationships between the Home Office Refugee and Asylum NGOs
- Refugee Action 'Choices' - Funded by Home Office / European Return Fund
- Surveyed 50 Asylum/Refugee/Migrant Organisations
- 60 Individual interviews with national & international NGOs, Home Office, UNHCR, IOM & welfare officers in detention centres
- Duration: March – December 2013

Structure of the presentation

- We will provide some background on AVR
- Examine some of our findings - the main focus is on Home Office and Refugee Action Senior Managers perspectives on:
 - Funding, partnerships and advocacy.
 - We will also raise some questions for discussion

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR)

- Refugee Action 'Choices' Programme
- Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) for asylum seekers,
- Assisted Voluntary Return for Irregular Migrants (AVRIM),
- Assisted Voluntary Return for Families and Children (AVRFC)

<http://www.choices-avr.org.uk>

Background

- In the UK:
- Approx 3,500 people return under the 'Choices' programme a year
- IOM previously delivered programme
- Refugee Action awarded contract in 2011
 - UK unusual: NGO end to end implementation
- In other Countries:
 - IOM main agent – but range of models inc. Social services & NGO approach across Europe

NGO Funding & Home Office Control?

- Remains a controversial issue in UK
- ‘Contract culture’ – New Labour
- Scholarly concerns – incorporations, co-option & control

“the sector that has **to chase money and resources for future survival**, it is not surprising that monies have been accepted with conditions. Conditions concerning surveillance, control and cooperation with the Home Office are not uncommon now for organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees”

(Hayes 2005: 192).

Academic Concerns

- Doing the Government's 'dirty work'?
- NASS, NGOS “have been formally incorporated into the emerging institutional framework..... [partnership are] both productive **and directive**” (Zetter et al 2005:177- 179).
- “**alarm bells** should be sounding about the implications of these partnerships” (Hayes 2005: 192).

Refugee Action: A Controversial Decision to Deliver AVR

AVR - a contentious issue

*“There **was a lot of internal debate** about whether we should or shouldn’t take on the broader service. But we asked our clients and we asked a lot of other organisations - and the feedback from them was **they wanted us to be there** rather than another organisation that perhaps didn’t provide our style of **independent advice**”*

Refugee Action, Senior Manager.

Independent & Ethical Service Delivery: Refugee Action's Ethos

*“There were good reasons why we thought we had to be involved in voluntary return and it’s because it’s **what our clients asked us to do** and they’ve trusted us for many, many, years. Destitution trap research has highlighted that **people want that independent, non-directed, impartial advice around return**. And we’ll often say, you’ll often hear our Director say, “it’s the second most important decision that someone takes, after fleeing their country”*

Refugee Action, Senior Manager.

Refugee Action: A Trusted Intermediary?

- *“It’s a matter of trust, they can have discussions with migrant groups that the Home Office can’t...realistically we know that there’s a concern about engaging directly with government, you know a lot of illegal migrants will be very fearful of government from their own experiences in their home countries....the main function is to be a trusted independent source”*
Home Office, Senior Manager.

- *“People are caught between a rock and a hard place in many instances. If we are looking at our core group of beneficiaries they need to know that they can go to an organisation **they can trust, that their details don’t get fed back** to the Home Office, until there is an actual application.”*

Refugee Action, Senior Manager.

Refugee Action's independent, Client-Centred and non-directive ethos

“There are those that stress that Intermediate Organisations are more likely to be interested in **meeting the actual needs** of those to whom services are provided, are less likely to be concerned with formal bureaucratic guidelines, and, because of their greater desire to understand the position of the recipients, are more likely than the state to **retain the confidence of their clients**”

(Ware 1989: 18).

Refugee Action's ethos – the mechanism through which they justify their delivery of the AVR programme - in an unsatisfactory situation?

Home Office Drivers

AVR:

- Delivers a high number of compliant returns
- Cheaper than forced removal and cost-effective

NGO-State Partnerships: Potential Risks

- NGOs 'chasing' or 'reliance' on State funding
- Diversion of NGO work
- Competition between NGOs

Structural Isomorphic Risks:

- Formalisation, professionalisation
- 'Mimicry'
- Mission drift
- loss of independent identity

The AVR Grant: Room for Manoeuvre?

- The Home Office regard AVR as a grant agreement, which gives more autonomy to Refugee Action.
- Because it is not a contract - no penalties attached.
- Home Office acknowledges that NGOs can challenge them. Refugee Action are not perceived as “*Government lapdog*”

Coercive isomorphism

- Advocacy deficit or chill?
- Ability to challenge or campaign against the Home Office?
- NGO-Government Compact.
- Our Survey: **67%** R&ACO and NGOs stated these partnerships are **beneficial to both** NGOs and the Government.

26% stated they believed partnerships were **primarily for the governments benefit.**

*“a mature understanding within government about **the role of the voluntary sector** which amounts to the following, government brings the voluntary sector on board and funds them to do a specific job and the data that is generated is **used to underpin our advocacy and our influencing work**”*

Senior Manager, Refugee Council

Evidence through service provision?

Refugee Action's perspectives on public and 'behind-the-scenes' advocacy

*“our role is to hold the government to account and to present the reality of what is going on on-the-ground – and to do this requires both kinds of advocacy, **behind the scenes work**, but if necessary, we do it **publicly through the courts.**”* Refugee Action Senior Manager.

*“we are an organisation that has a lot of different strands so we can **gather evidence** through our Choices work and then our One-Stop Service and can use it for our own policy work.”* Refugee Action Senior Manager.

Behind the scenes advocacy? Making subtle changes.

*“What Home Office funding allows us to do, is **affect the way that those programmes are run and delivered.** Through delivering Choices we’ve been able to discuss a number of things about the programme, **sometimes little things** like what the form looks like and what the timescales are and that kind of thing all of which have benefits for clients and you wouldn’t be able to do that if we weren’t delivering the service”*

Refugee Action, Senior Manager.

Enhanced Advocacy?

*“it would be difficult for us not to take the Home Office money, a) because it means we are able to give very good advice to people, b) because we can use the data and the research and the client experience **to affect policy change**, and without that advice programme it would be much more difficult for us to affect policy change because we would not have the **open space** between us and the Home Office.”*

Refugee Action, Senior Manager.

A 'Value- Added' Partnership?

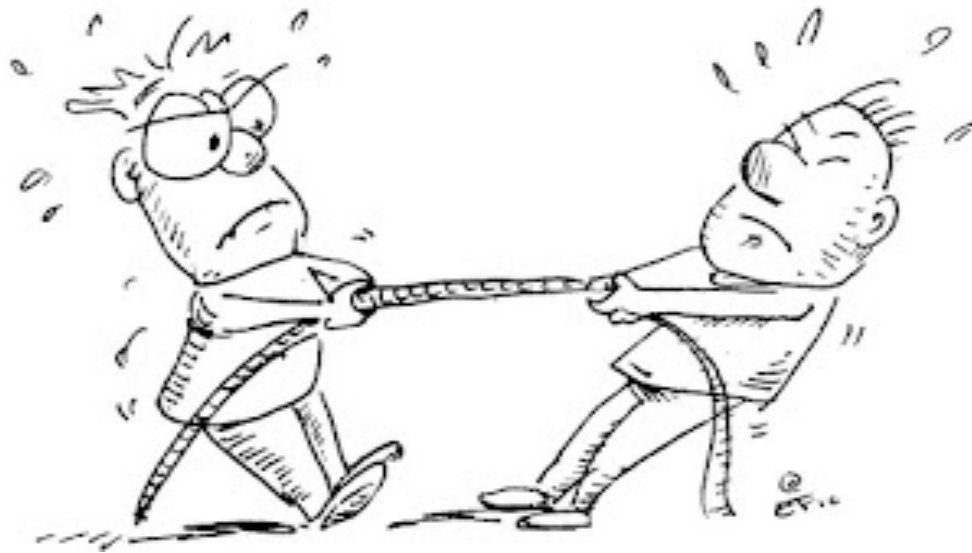
- According to Gidron et al (1992) there are generally 2 types of models in State/NGO collaborations
 1. the 'vendor variant' - in which the NGO acts as an agent of the State; or
 2. the 'partnership variant' - in which NGOs enjoy a significant degree of discretion in their operations.

The Refugee Action-Home Office 'relationship':

- A 'Value-Added' Partnership
- Based on Competitive Advantage

Not an 'Open' Space but a 'Contested' space?

- Contestation: drivers, motivations, ethos, etc.
- Constantly being negotiated and/or in conflict



AVR in IRCs

Research Findings:

Difficulty with AVR in IRCs:

- Time-frame, Access to advice, Removal Directives.

Importance of AVR in IRCs:

*“I actually, I feel that our work in detention is **our most important work...** because, already detainees are deprived of their liberty and deprived of everything that, that they would have outside. And if an independent organisation isn't in detention doing that, then **they're deprived of the option** of the voluntary return.”*

Refugee Action, Caseworker

Removal of AVR in IRCs from 01/04/14 – Detainee options: forced removal or Voluntary Departure.

AVR has been used increasingly by detainees. This has reduced the incentive to apply for AVR in the community and has **undermined** one of the main reasons for operating the programme.

Detainees incur significant costs for the Home Office to locate, arrest and detain: ***'It is therefore not appropriate that they should receive the same level of assistance as an individual who has complied with the Home Office earlier in the process.'***

Home Office Briefing on AVR in IRCs policy change

The 'Voluntariness' of AVR and 'Voluntary Departure'

- Home Office preference is for “voluntary removal” rather than voluntary return

AVR and VD:

- The adjective 'voluntary' seems to designate an absence of viable options **rather than a deliberate choice**

(Andrijasvic & Walters 2010)

Comments & Areas of Further Discussion

- Nuanced debate around ‘Choice’, ‘Voluntariness’, ‘Compliance’ & ‘Justice’
- Advocacy chill? Refugee Action - 2 forms of advocacy (based on evidence through service provision): behind-the-scenes (subtle changes) and public challenges (court).
- The Home Office referred to ‘relevant’ & ‘weighty’ NGOs in terms of insiders – implications of this categorisation for NGOs? The relationship between independence and relevance?
- Grant holder autonomy in the context of power relations – (Home Office as decision-maker (tenders) and policy changer).
- Finally, what is the future of AVR? – Election year, AVR tender extension until April 2015.

Thank you for your time

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