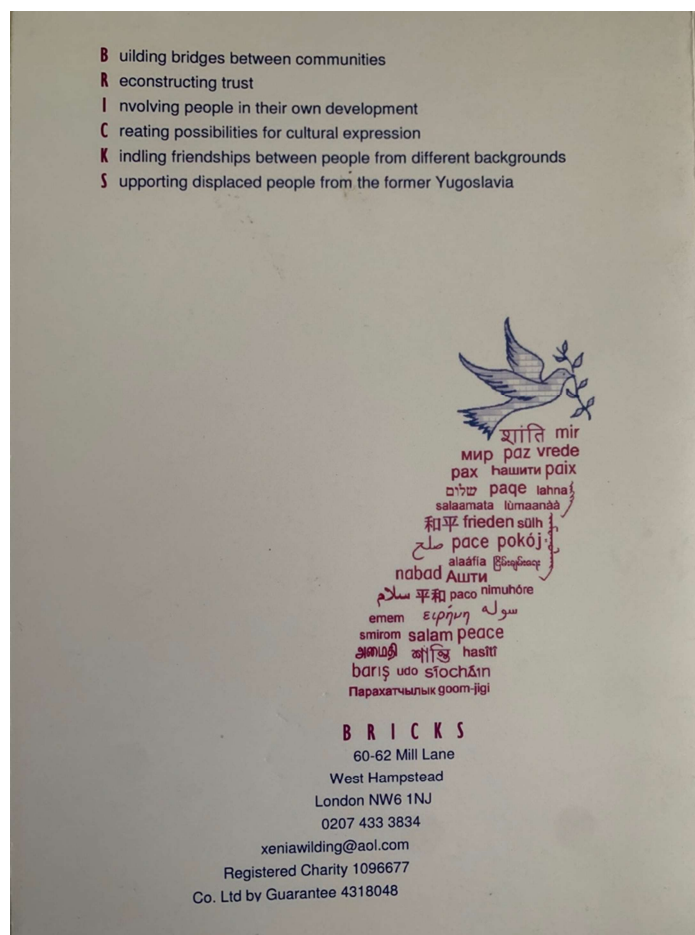


Refugee Organisations in London remembered

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Working within the charity sector in London for twenty years, I have seen refugee and migrant groups evolving, disappearing, big names forgotten, new names emerging.

Amongst this ebb and flow of refugee and migrant sector organisations in London, there are charities that had huge impact on the lives of refugees and migrants in their day, well-known within the sector and, in their time, well-connected with the Refugee Council. I reflect here on three organisations I worked with that have ceased operating but live on through their legacies and in people's memories.



BRICKS leaflet, courtesy of author.

The first charity I began paid work with, after a summer volunteering with the Refugee Council, was BRICKS. BRICKS operated for many years from a hut in the backyard of West Hampstead Community Centre in Mill Lane, London NW6. BRICKS was a registered charity, founded and led by Director Xenia Wilding, now a dear friend, generous in spirit, a whirlwind of creative

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All images courtesy of author.

energy, a wonderful linguist effortlessly able to switch between Serbo-Croat, English, Italian and Russian and connect with people on a human-to-human level. With a stroke of genius about her and a propensity to work late into the evening on people's cases, Xenia was affectionately referred to by some in the community centre as Insania Wild. Xenia worked for years as a talented illustrator and graphic designer in London but stepped up to offer her language skills as an interpreter to people arriving in London from all sides of the conflict within the former Yugoslavia as the crisis there unfolded in the 1990s. In response to need, Xenia found herself undertaking training, offered by the Refugee Council and others, to better understand and address the needs of refugees. She established the charitable organisation BRICKS.

BRICKS provided information to the organisation Sarajevo Charter on the ethnic and religious backgrounds of refugees from all over the former Yugoslavia and in 1998 participated in a large conference "Seeing the Other" to comprehend and counteract the pressures used to mobilise and sustain fear and hatred between different ethnic groups.

Over the years, BRICKS received funding from a variety of sources including Camden Council, the National Lottery, the Department for Education and Skills and the Home Office's Integration Fund and secured small grants for individual community members from the then Medical Foundations for the Victims of Torture (now known as Freedom from Torture)'s Millennium Awards scheme and from the Hampstead Wells and Campden Trust. BRICKS was the only charity in the UK that aimed to work with people from all sides of conflict in former Yugoslavia and bring people from different religions and regions together. It achieved some wonderful peace building work, fostering friendships and rekindling trust between people from the different sides of former Yugoslavia. It also courted controversy for daring to do so; those who became involved in supporting its work sometimes found themselves questioned by others holding polarised views about the conflict in former Yugoslavia.

The charity developed organically just like its name. It began as the Bosnian Refugee Information Centre, shortened to BRIC with connotations of bric-a-brac. Then as the crisis in Kosova developed, it took on a wider remit and became the Bosnian Refugee Information Centre Kosovar Support. However, a number of community members disliked being labelled as "refugee". Although "refugee" has a very precise legal meaning, at that time it often took on negative connotations in public discourse and amongst school children was sometimes used as a slur. Some people felt that being identified as refugees prevented wider recognition of their other identities as film makers, writers, professionals, parents, citizens and that this very label acted as an obstacle to moving forward with their lives. For these reasons, the organisation decided to liberate its community members from the label "refugee", changing name again to become Bosnian Resource Information Centre Kosovar Support. Then the focus widened from front line advice and advocacy work towards work to promote and support cultural heritage and it became Bosnian Resource Information and Cultural Centre Kosovar Support, shortened again to BRICKS.

The metaphor of building bricks, of colourful community mosaics and the importance of each person in a community was central to the charity's philosophy. BRICKS held several creative events in a local pottery café on the theme "Style the Tile", encouraging people to come together and create designs on tiles as a way of visually representing our diverse community. Some of these tessellated tiles featured in a key leaflet BRICKS produced about its work. These kinds of creative activities were good for bringing together people to work together on something collective; the task of working alongside each other to express artistic creativity in common purpose transcended the need for common spoken language.

Besides providing information, advice and interpreting, BRICKS engaged people to offer psychotherapy in different languages, reflexology and massage, and even tai chi activities.

My first role at BRICKS in 2003 was to manage a volunteering programme bringing people together from diverse backgrounds to learn from each other and exchange skills. Soon I became involved in supporting frontline advocacy work and developing cultural projects with the aim of creating spaces and opportunities for people to connect as people.

We had some fabulous events. Setting up opportunities for people to give community talks about topics of interest, one of the most memorable is a talk given by a dentist on the history of chocolate, accompanied by a community chocolate cake competition. We held many musical events and concerts, even an eco-fashion show where people dressed up in recycled and refashioned vintage clothes collected from local charity shops and cat-walked down the aisle of a very beautiful old church in Camden. Some of these events and activities are documented in local newspapers such as the Ham and High and Camden New Journal, others are recorded only in people's memories.

The spirit of the organisation was very much an outward facing one, welcoming in volunteers from diverse backgrounds and establishing connections with a broad base of supporters. Mainstream organisations such as Swiss Cottage Central Library, universities and a local Arts Centre donated venue and community exhibition space. We worked on partnership projects such as the Heritage Lottery and Trust for London funded Refugee Communities History Project with the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, Museum of London, London Metropolitan University and diverse refugee community organisations.

We were lucky to have the support of many volunteers over the years, from Yugoslav and English communities but also London residents from diverse countries such as Japan, Burma, Ireland and Italy. Volunteers helped in many ways, from offering interpreting support, to helping people develop conversational English skills, to accompanying people on a first visit to a museum or library, to creating publicity materials to performing music in BRICKS concerts. It was central to our philosophy to challenge the casting of refugees as simply recipients of help. We facilitated refugees to share time and skills within both BRICKS and the wider community and supported people to access education and employment opportunities.

Like many other refugee charities at the time, BRICKS' work was very much volunteer powered. Besides short-term volunteers, we were lucky to have long-term volunteers like Alan Wilding, Xenia's husband, who gave not only practical hands-on support but also helped with project idea brainstorming to keep the work of the organisation dynamic and resourced.

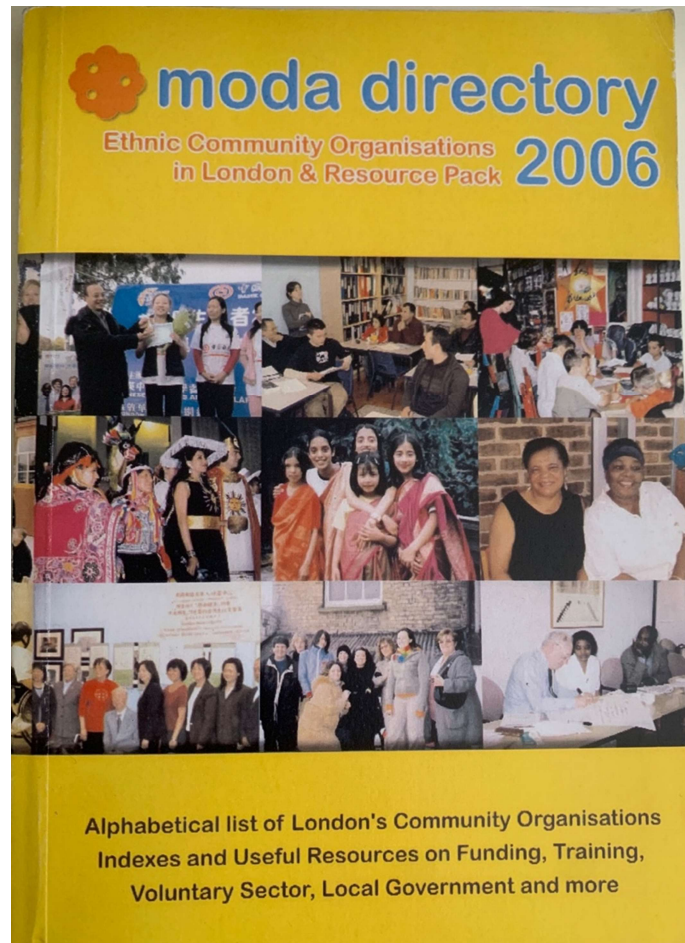
Many people were supported with urgent welfare and housing needs and with appeals to remain in London. Facilitating the building of friendships within and across their new communities was also an important tranche of BRICKS' work.

BRICKS supported community members to come together to produce bilingual books of short stories and recipes and community films. We held creative gatherings with poetry readings, film launches and traditional folk dance to bring people together. We even hosted a Cardboard Citizens' performance of Shakespeare's Pericles, generating moving discussion amongst community members about its themes.

As thinking in and about the refugee sector evolved, moving from the buzz word of multiculturalism to the idea of integration, ethnicity centred community support groups found it more challenging to source funding. As BRICKS supported people to feel more at home in their new communities and as people became more settled, more fluent in English and adept at navigating English systems and as the numbers of people arriving in the UK seeking refuge from former Yugoslavia dwindled, the need of an organisation like BRICKS to provide this kind of support reduced. West Hampstead Community Association dissolved in April 2010. BRICKS gave up the office base it had been renting from the Association in Mill Lane.

In so many instances, BRICKS acted as the catalyst for people to connect and form friendships. Many friendships have continued to flourish without the need for an organisation to provide ongoing friendship incubation spaces. Today, BRICKS' events are remembered with warmth and affection by many in the community and we have been talking about the shape a possible community reunion event could take. It is perhaps testimony to its pioneering work that, whilst remembered, the need for BRICKS no longer exists.

A second charity I worked with on and off for about five years from 2004 was MODA, the Migrant Organisation Development Agency. Migrating itself from St Pauls to Vauxhall to Stratford, MODA was a second-tier agency with the vision to work with both refugee and migrant groups. Its Director, Dr Kamal Rassul, a talented poet writing under the name Kamal Mirawdeli, was a writer and political activist who became second runner in elections for president of the Kurdistan region In Iraq in July 2009.



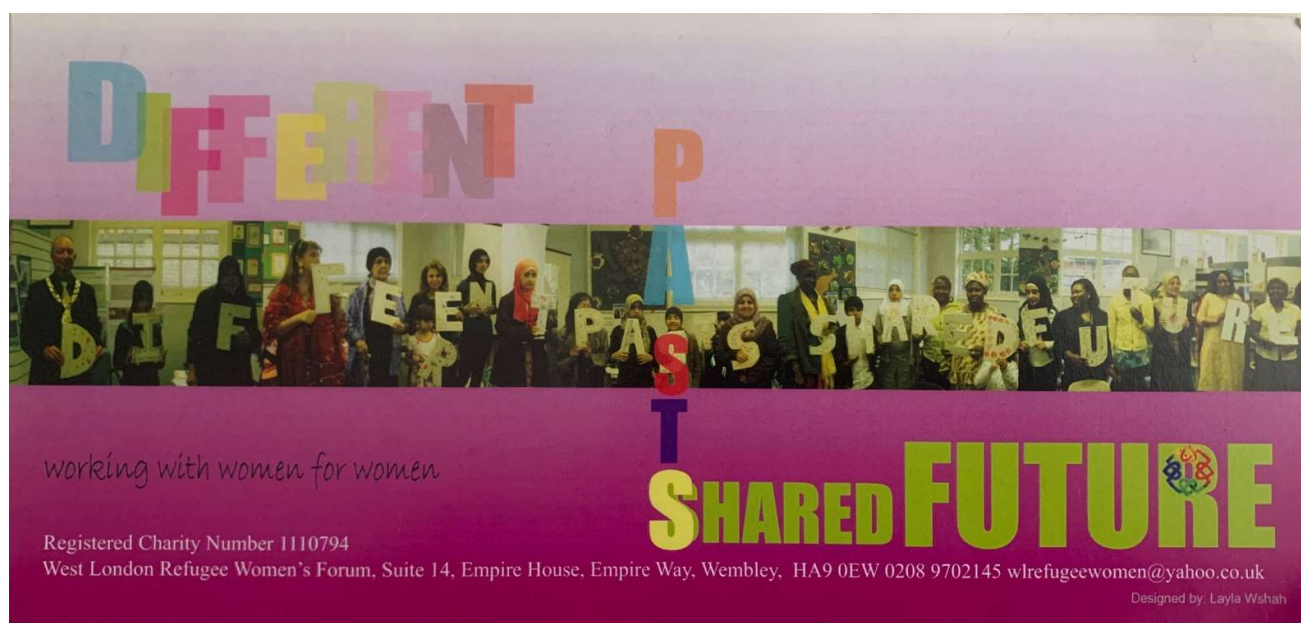
MODA material, courtesy of author.

MODA's aims were to provide information, coordination, training, technical support and other capacity building services to migrant and minority ethnic community organisations across London. It ran community development training, produced a regular printed newsletter to help groups in the sector connect with each other and shared much useful information to support community development. Unlike the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, another second-tier organisation which for a long time only supported established refugee organisations before adopting a wider remit, MODA was from the outset very much into supporting the development of emerging refugee and migrant groups, playing midwife to the birth of diverse new community groups and charitable organisations.

People would phone to discuss ideas, some tentative and half-baked, some passionate and urgent, for new organisations. We would invite people to discuss ideas over tea in our office and send people off to collect signatures of supporters, names of people willing to form a committee. MODA's role was one of advising people on how to conduct research to find out real community needs, with the aim of identifying sound, meaningful and worthwhile project ideas rather than entertaining one-man-bands and fantasists.

MODA won the support of diverse funders including the Association of London Government and the Lottery and worked on projects in partnership with a range of organisations including the School for Social Entrepreneurs SSE.

MODA was, our team at the time thought, the first organisation in the sector to move from printed newsletters to a regular weekly e-bulletin for our members. This helped to develop a very wide reach and we were a well-known name in the refugee and migrant sector. MODA produced two directories of migrant and refugee organisations in London in 2005 and 2006; flicking through these publications gives a flavour of the rich diversity of refugee and migrant groups at that time. These directories include many organisations, including BRICKS, that have changed name or have ceased operating.



West London Refugee Women's Forum material, courtesy of author.

The third charity to mention is West London Refugee Women's Forum with whom I worked between 2006 and 2010. This registered charity also changed its name to WLRWMF West London Refugee and Migrants Forum. Based in Wembley Park and working with refugee women's groups across six London boroughs, it was chaired by Hanna Field and shared office space with ICIC, the Iraqi Centre for Integration and Cohesion. We ran many different projects. Funders included Renewal, City Parochial Foundation and the Community Development Foundation. We produced an award-winning multilingual recipe book and worked collaboratively with the Women's Library, then housed in Old Castle Street, London E1, on a creative Women and Peace project. Hanna, the Chair for many years, was a community leader who inspired many creative ideas, for bringing together women from diverse backgrounds.

With all three charities, I had left my post some time before the organisations ceased operating. None of these charities had perfectly neat endings. It can be painful to wind down an organisation that you may have put much time and effort in over the years, painful to think

about organisations after they have ceased because of wistful loss. Where we may prefer associating ourselves with organisations still operating as they are perceived to be vital and successful, perhaps we may find ourselves rewriting private and collective memory, actively allowing memories of how we connected to dissolved organisations to dissolve too. Ironically, perhaps the stronger the connection we had with organisations no longer operating, the stronger our instinct to distance ourselves from remembering these after they have ceased.

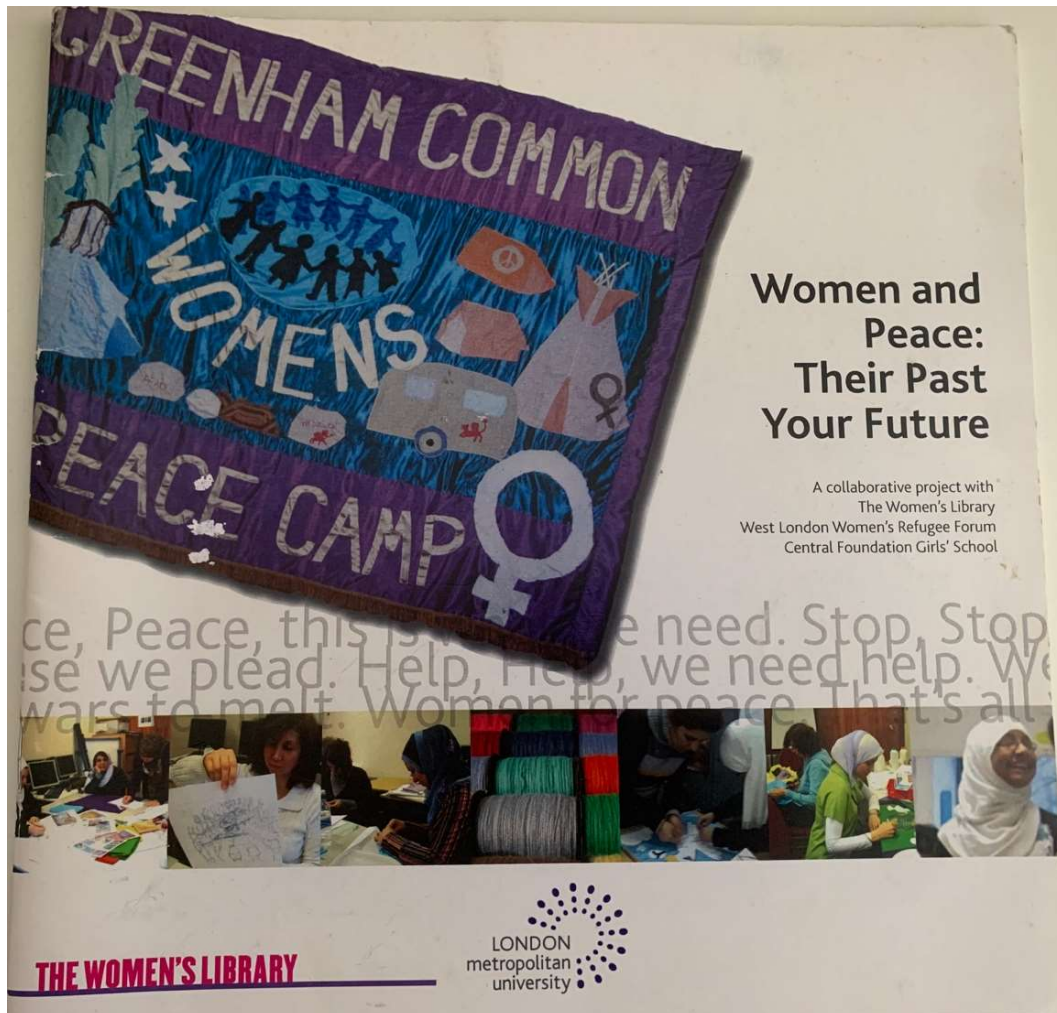
I have deposited charities' materials into the University of East London's Refugee Archives: I wish I had arranged to take across more. It is so easy to think that we will always have tomorrow to sort through boxes of material, next year to arrange to deposit pamphlets and leaflets in public archives. We may procrastinate, perhaps hesitating over which archive might be the most suitable for the items we are considering to deposit, or delay discussions with colleagues about what might be ethically permissible to deposit. Meanwhile, materials we may have been considering donating to archives may get moved, lost, destroyed by fire or water, accidentally sent to recycling. Speaking from this experience, I join those urging people to consider taking action to pass on items sooner rather than later to archivists pleased to welcome them into public collections.

Organisations that cease to operate may indeed live on for many years through their legacies and in people's memories. But where records are not passed on, they are prone to fading away in social memory. Like many refugee charities at that time, BRICKS and West London Refugee Women's Forum did not run websites and had a very light digital footprint. MODA had an active online presence in its time but did not archive its website. The information about these charities that can be collected by skimming the surface of the internet does not reflect the mighty work that these charities did and the huge impact they had within communities. Without archived material, and written reflections such as this one, they might all too easily become lost from public sight.

Archiving the records of charitable organisations' work is important not simply as some vanity project or as a nostalgic act. Those of us who work within the charity sector know how swiftly an organisation can be dismantled, yet how much work building an organisation from scratch can take. We cannot take the existence of an established refugee charity sector in the UK for granted. Who knows what our society might look like tomorrow, what the politics will be around welcoming and including people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in our communities.

We might archive our charity's materials, not out of fondness for the past but out of concern for the future. Archiving materials can be social justice activism! Archives can help us pass on our learning to new generations in society, inspire people with concepts and practical good practice ideas for future social justice projects, spark thinking about alternative ways of organising communities and free new generations from laboriously reinventing wheels, enabling energy to be thrown into taking new projects and ideas forward.

So this is a call for all of us engaged in the refugee charity sector to dig out brochures, leaflets, photographs, minute books, letters, campaign materials, artefacts, passwords to the back ends of websites, and explore the possible options we have with different archives to preserve these for future public access. We can be proactive here, reaching out to archivists, rather than waiting to be chased!



West London Refugee Women's Forum material, courtesy of author.