



# **Citizen Diplomats: Exploring the Links Between Community Organising and Humanitarian Di- plomacy**

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## Summary

- This paper explores whether there is any middle ground between the generally top-down approaches to local involvement taken by organisations engaged in humanitarian diplomacy, and the often spontaneous grassroots citizen actions, which are often disparate and lack clear goals, and may be relatively short-term. It assesses the potential for a genuinely locally rooted but organised form of citizen diplomacy, which is able to achieve sustained advocacy successes on humanitarian issues beyond those directly experienced in a particular community. Greater achievements in this area would open new avenues to realise change globally, with potential to involve far more people in sustained long-term advocacy.
- The key to such middle ground may lie in the concept and methods of community organising. While communities have organised and conducted advocacy for centuries, the modern understanding of this term comes from the work Saul Alinsky did in the USA in the 1930s, his seminal texts, and how others have taken up and adapted his approach. This concept of community organising may provide the means by which organisations engaged in humanitarian diplomacy can connect with more spontaneous and disparate forms of 'citizen' activity which have seen a rise in recent years. Examples include Occupy Wall Street and similar anti-austerity protests globally, the mass citizen response to the unprecedented 2015 refugee arrivals in Europe, and activity around climate change exemplified in the school strikes worldwide and local movements such as the UK-based Extinction Rebellion. Connecting with such movements at local levels would enable the building of embedded local roots and relationships across and among those in a community, rather than only top-down relationships with national or international organisations, enabling and advancing organised advocacy on global causes that can have a sustained influence on power holders at all levels.
- The key finding is that there is much potential for linkages between the humanitarian diplomats and community organisers, with the case study demonstrating that locally-rooted organisations and individuals can be successfully engaged on global humanitarian issues and can make useful contributions to humanitarian diplomacy strategies. The recommendation is for mutual learning and discussion between the humanitarian diplomats of the Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement and large non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community organising groups such as Citizens UK. This could lead to the creation of hybrid, locally-rooted, humanitarian community groups composed of trained 'citizen diplomats', noting that current debates on localisation within the humanitarian sector provide a conducive context.
- As such, the concept of a 'citizen diplomat' could be broadened into 'citizen humanitarian', a new kind of humanitarian working in organisations that operate horizontally through mutual learning and aid.



## Introduction

The term 'diplomacy' has long been associated with an elite activity confined to the activities of governments and their formally educated public servants. The concept of 'humanitarian diplomacy' widens the field in recognising that advocacy by the RCRC Movement and NGOs to further their work aiding the vulnerable is a form of diplomacy, utilising many of the same methods as state diplomats.<sup>1</sup> However, although this work aims to address the issues faced by people experiencing humanitarian crises, it is still generally remote from them, taking place at United Nations (UN) meetings and international summits.

While diplomacy and its humanitarian dimension may seem elite and remote from many communities around the world, recent decades have witnessed the rise of 'citizen' activity, such as citizen journalism and crowdfunding. The term 'citizen diplomacy' is also already in use, with the US-based Center for Citizen Diplomacy defining it as 'the concept that every global citizen has the right, even the responsibility, to engage across cultural differences and create shared understanding through person-to-person interactions'.<sup>2</sup> This paper uses the term 'citizen' in its broadest sense of world citizens, rather than those of any particular country.

However, these citizen activities face several limitations. Firstly, there are limits on inclusivity, as many initiatives designed to involve ordinary people and/or beneficiaries of humanitarian action are often driven from the centre by large organisations staffed by the formally educated and socially privileged. Inclusion is often more about involvement in service delivery rather than advocacy, or is limited to holding focus groups to give ordinary people a 'voice.' A further limitation concerns genuine grassroots movements created and led by those facing or witnessing humanitarian crises. While these are sometimes more socially inclusive, they risk becoming divided, losing sight of their goals and burning out as they are taken in competing directions, and of being co-opted by those most powerful locally, particularly as they generally lack clearly defined principles and missions. Tensions in these movements can also lead to violent splinter movements emerging, for example amongst France's 'Yellow Vest' activists<sup>3</sup>. A third limitation is that citizen activities are often viewed as confined to issues directly impacting on a particular community, so that the people living in a deprived borough of London are unwilling or unable to undertake advocacy activities in support of global causes. In addition to a perceived

limitation in terms of issues, there is a more real limitation in terms of effectiveness. As political sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo points out in an interview for *The Atlantic*, while social movements can draw attention to the problems that spurred them, they are not equipped to solve them; rather, they merely place the problems on the political agenda. Thus, beyond drawing attention, they are much less well equipped to drive concrete or sustained change.<sup>4</sup>

To explore the possibility of overcoming these limitations, the case study chosen is that of Citizens UK, a charity both creating and supporting community organising in an increasing number of UK cities. Alongside its work on local issues, its members have conducted advocacy on refugee resettlement for the last two decades. This element of their work is examined to determine how the community organising approach could add a new dimension to humanitarian diplomacy as understood by the RCRC Movement and large NGOs.

The main analysis is divided into three sections. The first section explores the concept of humanitarian diplomacy in the RCRC Movement and large NGOs, how it operates at a local level, and its limitations. The second section presents the background to one of the leading theories in community organising, and the broad learnings that humanitarian diplomats can draw from it. The third section explores potential learnings through a case study of community organising charity Citizens UK's advocacy work on refugee resettlement. This research has been undertaken through the analysis of secondary sources, exploring key concepts and methods through academic articles, and conducting media searches on Citizens UK's refugee resettlement work. Material primarily from the organisation's website has also been examined. In addition, three semi-structured telephone/Zoom interviews were conducted with current and former Citizens UK organisers who have been heavily involved in refugee resettlement work (Interviews section at the end of this paper).

## Humanitarian diplomacy: An elite activity?

Attempts to influence power holders to act on humanitarian issues have no doubt existed since the emergence of human communities. However, the concept of humanitarian diplomacy is generally said to have emerged with Henri Dunant and his founding of the RCRC Movement. His work in the 1860s persuading governments to sign the Geneva Conventions shows that 'right from the start he was involved in service delivery and in advocacy'.<sup>5</sup> Such advocacy is a central tool of humanitarian diplomats, alongside others such as negotiating, drafting formal agreements, and gathering evidence. While today other humanitarian actors are knowledgeable and heavily involved in such actions, the movement's definition remains widely adopted.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) defines humanitarian diplomacy as 'persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles'.<sup>6</sup> The 'fundamental humanitarian principles' of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence are key. They distinguish humanitarian diplomacy as understood by the Movement and most large NGOs from its use to define humanitarian activities and campaigns by nation states.

The potential for state co-option of the concept may render the most controversial and challenging principle of neutrality increasingly prized as a marker of the truly 'humanitarian', while the principle also causes confusion outside of the IFRC and makes relations with other actors problematic at times.<sup>7</sup> Although the Movement views neutrality as a means of achieving humanitarian outcomes rather than an end in itself<sup>8</sup>, misunderstandings about the concept may be a factor making engagement at a grassroots citizen level challenging, where political, partial, and biased viewpoints can be difficult to manage. Similarly, National Societies' status as auxiliaries of public authorities<sup>9</sup> may also distance the Movement's humanitarian diplomacy activities from a grassroots level.

However, as a membership network, the Movement does have a local and citizen dimension in that many of its service delivery activities and elements of its advocacy are carried out by local volunteers. National Societies also partner with other organisations at national and local levels, including NGOs and businesses. Nevertheless, its approach still appears distinct from citizen-driven service delivery and

advocacy in that it is generally highly organised, top-down, and conducted through 'volunteers' rather than 'members'.

This is not to say that the Movement does not aim to involve ordinary citizens or local communities in activities contributing to humanitarian diplomacy. Its *Protocol Handbook* notes that 'communities are not targets but the starting points for action in support of the most vulnerable' and recommends investment at community level and strengthening of 'human capital'<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, there appear to be limitations in depth of grassroots engagement and activity, particularly in that much of the language used is framed as top-down, about 'giving voices' to communities and the 'vulnerable'. The *Practising Humanitarian Diplomacy Handbook* seems to frame activity at local levels as focused on building relations with local authorities,<sup>11</sup> and makes no mention of scope for local actors to engage in international or global causes. There is reference to 'grassroots advocacy', but this is explained through a definition in another NGO publication (as examined below). Therefore, there does not seem to be a conscious strategy around incorporating the concept of a 'citizen diplomat' in the movement's understanding of humanitarian diplomacy.

The Movement's aim to include more people and intended beneficiaries is now widespread among humanitarian organisations. It is exemplified in the 2016 'Grand Bargain', in which a group of donors and large NGOs are committed to 'making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary',<sup>12</sup> envisaging a 'participation revolution' to 'include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives'.<sup>13</sup> However, the framing still fits a top-down approach, about partnership and inclusion, rather than the grassroots as leaders or drivers of their participation.

It is important to note, however, that there are some more innovative approaches to the grassroots by large NGOs, such as that outlined in the *Grassroots Advocacy Handbook* developed by the Cambodian local branches of three large NGOs (and referred to by the IFRC on grassroots advocacy). This resource is aimed at local communities and envisages leading their own advocacy, working to build networks across and between local communities.<sup>14</sup> This approach is much closer to community organising, but it is not systemised or theorised in the same way, and it appears somewhat disconnected from the work of the Movement and large NGOs. In this context, relationships between the two approaches are more likely to emerge as top-down partnerships, with community action confined to local issues.

Despite the lack of grassroots involvement in the international and global work of many large NGOs, there are some interesting examples of how local communities can work successfully on issues that do not directly affect them or align with their narrower self-interests. Gill, Fisher, and Hynes have explored the concept of 'glocalisation' to define connections between global and local scales.<sup>15</sup> Their study of the 25-year campaign by a group of local activists that eventually succeeded in the closure of an immigration detention centre shows how local people acted on a global issue that had manifested itself locally, and how they attracted wider support and grew through connections with national and international groups.<sup>16</sup> These activists could be viewed as 'citizen diplomats'. However, without the long-term structural underpinning provided by community organising approaches, it appears that such locally-driven success stories on global issues are uncommon, and their successes are not communicated sufficiently widely so that they could achieve wider change or inspire action in other locations.

There are other more widespread forms of local activity that could be viewed as citizen diplomacy. These are often referred to as 'new social movements' (NSMs). Koca views the UK's various Refugee Welcome groups as a form of NSM with their focus on identity and promoting the rights of marginalised groups, rather than traditional social class-based local campaigning.<sup>17</sup> Such movements are able to transcend boundaries, forming transnational and international networks.<sup>18</sup> These networks can be seen in the widespread citizen activity across Europe in response to the 2015 'refugee crisis'. However, as noted in the introduction to this paper, NSMs present difficulties for more established humanitarian diplomacy actors in that they generally lack clear campaigning goals, suffer from a lack of unity, and may have very temporary impacts. Furthermore, Koca's work does not explore the background to Refugee Welcome groups. Their relative longevity and successes are partly due to their deliberate and focused creation by community organisers from Citizens UK, and as such, they are not wholly spontaneous locally-driven groups (as explained in the final section). In fact, Refugee Welcome groups demonstrate the potential bridge between traditional humanitarian diplomacy and local 'citizen diplomats' that can be built through community organising, and in particular, through Citizens UK's adoption of Alinsky's approach, explored in the following section.

## Community organising: Potential linkages

Community organising is different from community development and capacity building as understood by many large NGOs. It has a longer heritage and is more concerned with what could be viewed as humanitarian diplomacy activities, such as advocacy and building networks of stakeholders, than service delivery. In their study of international community organising, Beck and Purcell define it as an approach that establishes organisations of organisations, which 'build power in order to achieve changes in policy and practice within institutions that have an impact on the community'.<sup>19</sup> It is the community itself that drives these activities, rather than acting as a complement to a larger national organisation that gives the community a 'voice' in its activities.

As Beck and Purcell note, community organising in a theoretical sense first emerged with the Alinsky model in the USA, based on Saul Alinsky's practices from the 1930s to the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> Alinsky's 1972 book *Rules for Radicals* served as a guide, and he founded the International Areas Foundation, spreading his methods internationally. Citizens UK is a member of that organisation and explicitly bases its approach on Alinsky's work. Therefore, it is important to outline his views on local power and influence.

Alinsky took a very pragmatic approach to engaging people within a community, noting that individual self-interest was key, being less concerned with the ideological positions of individuals and organisations than with 'how they could add to the creating of a power organisation based on people power'.<sup>21</sup> The aim was to create networks with 'stocks of social capital',<sup>22</sup> whereby an individual or organisation would support a particular action to build alliances that they could subsequently draw on in support of their own causes, thus building alliances of 'aggregated self-interest'.<sup>23</sup> This differs from 'giving voice' to the 'vulnerable' or the local community in recognising local individuals and organisations as possessors of social capital that they may deploy in support of others as well as themselves.

Furthermore, Alinsky did not shy away from notions of power and conflict. Bunyan contrasts this with community development models and their 'hollowed out' concepts of 'partnership' and 'empowerment' that have removed any radical edge in their shift to managerialism'.<sup>24</sup> Alinsky argued against diluted terms, putting conflict at the heart of actions he helped instigate. He argued that 'all issues must be polarised if action is to follow'<sup>25</sup> and that divisive

tactics should be used to turn opponents into enemies, motivating action and dispelling doubts or apathy.<sup>26</sup> This aspect of his approach poses difficulties for the neutrality principle in humanitarian diplomacy and would require adapting, particularly in settings with serious existing conflicts or tensions between different groups.

While Alinsky embraced conflict, he also embraced compromise as a 'key and beautiful word ... always present in the pragmatics of operation'.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, although he did not advocate neutrality towards targets or opponents of an action, he was much more concerned with the ends than the means.<sup>28</sup> This allowed engagement with opponents where useful and the formation of alliances, creating broad bases that have resulted in its labelling as 'broad based community organising' (as explained by Bunyan<sup>29</sup>). Arguably, it is this aspect of Alinsky's approach that has inspired its wide application and longevity, more than the embracing of conflict.

An important difference from community development and from many humanitarian diplomacy strategies is that Alinsky's approach not only uses existing community leaders, but also identifies potential new leaders and 'consistently and systematically' develops them.<sup>30</sup> Alinsky refers to the education of an organiser as requiring 'frequent long conferences ... dealing with quite a range of issues',<sup>31</sup> as opposed to one-off capacity building workshops. This is an aspect of community organising that could be viewed as more top-down in that skilled or professional community organisers train newcomers. However, Alinsky's aim seemed to be enabling new leaders to drive their own actions over time.

The final key aspect of Alinsky's approach with potential relevance for humanitarian diplomats concerns the breadth of community and of potential issues. He emphasised focusing on those issues within people's personal experience, avoiding generalities such as the notion of the good life or general morals, and instead focusing on specifics such as 'this immorality or this slum landlord'.<sup>32</sup> This focus on issues within people's experience could be viewed as limiting the potential for humanitarian diplomats to learn from the Alinsky approach. However, the strategy of using personal experience could be developed in a different direction (as explained in Citizens UK's approach below). Furthermore, Alinsky did not place tight geographical boundaries on his concept of community, instead noting that 'the word "community" means community of interests, not physical community'.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, some aspects of Alinsky's community organising approach provide useful considerations for humanitarian diplomats wishing to engage ordinary people in more meaningful ways and on more issues. However, there are problematic aspects, most notably around notions of neutrality, conflict, and polarisation. However, Citizens UK's adaptation provides a moderated version of his approach with its emphasis on compromise and the broad base that is more compatible with humanitarian diplomacy principles and methods.

Citizens UK has grown organically out of several city-based organisations up to its present incarnation as a registered charity with a London HQ, reaching its thirtieth birthday in 2018. Its roots lie in the Citizens Organising Foundation created in Bristol in 1988, joining with various London community organisations in 2000, and continuing to expand to other parts of the UK.<sup>34</sup> Like Alinsky, it builds an organisation of organisations, with local faith-based organisations, charities, schools, and others forming chapters, creating a 'broad based alliance of civil society institutions to build power'.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, it does not avoid the concept of power, defining community organising as 'returning power to people'.<sup>36</sup> However, like Alinsky, it also takes a pragmatic approach and is not wedded to a particular ideology. Former Citizens UK organiser Bekele Woyecha noted that it places 'people before programme' with an emphasis on relationships and 'making sure everyone knows each other'.<sup>37</sup> Compromise is also crucial, with Woyecha commenting that it is about 'gathering people of different political persuasions and of none'.<sup>38</sup> This allows for the creation of what Pete Brierly described as a permanent structure to seek change and remain campaigning.<sup>39</sup> A further key aspect derived from Alinsky is the continued training and development of local leaders, starting in 1989 and growing to the current system of national residential training events and shorter local training days,<sup>40</sup> with a 'guild' of 45 highly skilled organisers.<sup>41</sup> Again, rather than relying only on existing community leaders, another organiser pointed out how Citizens UK has also trained people who have previously done no community organising.<sup>42</sup> Citizens UK also emphasises local issues and those national issues directly impacting communities and connecting with people's self-interest, campaigning on matters such as low wages and local road safety. However, its approach is broader in scope than that of Alinsky, in that such local issues may be used to connect with people and to 'test relationships ... so you know you can work together', as Woyecha noted.<sup>43</sup> Unlike a pure transposing of Alinsky into a British context, Citizens UK has moved beyond the purely local and national with its significant work on refugee

issues, which could be viewed as demonstrating the potential of 'glocalisation'. This expansion beyond the purely local is one way in which Citizens UK's approach could be viewed as an adaptation of community organising with greater relevance for humanitarian diplomats.

Another key adaptation is its avoidance of conflict and polarisation, as exemplified in its far less confrontational tactics. While Alinsky and his followers often threatened (though less often carried out) actions such as sit-ins and major disruptions of businesses, Citizens UK holds peaceful, non-confrontational demonstrations and negotiations. This has led Folkes to describe its approach as 'institution-based apolitical politics',<sup>44</sup> meaning it does not alienate power holders that humanitarian diplomats would engage with in private diplomacy. Another organiser referred to the use of Freedom of Information Requests and work with law firms<sup>45</sup> – tactics associated with the campaigns of large NGOs.

Finally, while Alinsky's 1972 book cites numerous examples of his leading and organising local actions, Citizens UK is perhaps more explicit about its management of many of the actions taken under its banner, with its controlled and scripted campaigns as Folkes explores in her article.<sup>46</sup> Woyecha described scripting as natural, pointing out that world leaders are scripted.<sup>47</sup> Such management and control may render this approach to community organising more relevant to humanitarian diplomacy, as the actions led by local leaders may be devised and managed as part of a wider strategy, helping avoid potential risks to other diplomatic channels.

Citizens UK is best viewed as an adaptation and moderation of Alinsky's approach to community organising. It has retained the foundation in building local relationships and developing local leaders, creating organic structures that can be mobilised across multiple issues. However, it has adapted traditional community organising by showing that local actors are interested in and successful on issues beyond their immediate self-interest and can act on global humanitarian issues. Its local structures can be used for the building of side-to-side and bottom-up relationships, which appear to be generally omitted from humanitarian diplomacy approaches as explored in the previous section. While pure Alinsky tactics would not suit the RCRC Movement's or many large NGOs' humanitarian diplomacy strategies, Citizens UK's apolitical, non-confrontational, and more managed approach allow these organisations to learn from community organisers to build a more organic, inclusive, and long-term local dimension to their work. This

may enable the engagement of 'citizen diplomats', while avoiding the unpredictability and risks posed by unmanaged citizen actions or groups.

If humanitarian diplomats are to consider this approach, it is necessary to explore whether it successfully meets its local goals, and whether those goals can impact national and global humanitarian issues. When asked their view of the importance of local actions, an organiser referred to local actions as 'structure tests', showing how many people are engaged and could turn out nationally on an issue, and thus speak to power holders beyond the local level.<sup>48</sup> The following section explores Citizens UK's work on refugee resettlement to ascertain how effective such 'structure tests' may be.

## Refugee resettlement at the grassroots

Refugee resettlement presents an example of how managed community organising, rather than more spontaneous eruptions of citizen activity, can engage the grassroots on global issues. The European 'refugee crisis' of 2015 gave added impetus to Citizens UK's work on refugee issues and a greater number of grassroots individuals and organisations with which to build relationships. In recent years, its focus has been on bringing refugees and asylum seekers from camps in Europe and the Middle East to the UK. Many of the examples that follow relate to work on unaccompanied child asylum seekers and the organisation's Safe Passage campaign, which played a major role in securing safe routes for children under the EU's Dublin III Regulation and under the 'Dubs Amendment' (named after Labour politician Lord Dubs who championed the cause in Parliament). In addition to Safe Passage, there are examples such as campaigning for expansion in the resettlement of vulnerable Syrian refugees under the Government's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

At first glance, Citizens UK's work in this area appears high-level and national, with frequent involvement of national politicians such as Lord Dubs, and celebrities, such as those who signed its February 2017 open letter to the government calling for an extension of the Dubs Scheme (resettling unaccompanied child asylum seekers without family ties in the UK).<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the Safe Passage campaign became an independent charity in March 2019,<sup>50</sup> and currently appears to function more as a traditional NGO with a particularly parliamentary focus. However, the roots of this work lie in a group of volunteers drawn from community organisations and faith

leaders belonging to Citizens UK who travelled to Calais in 2015 to explore how they could meaningfully help.<sup>51</sup> Unlike many other groups making that journey, these volunteers were trained and focused, screening over 250 cases of refugees with potential legal claims to asylum in the UK.<sup>52</sup> In addition to its managed grassroots beginnings, the following elements of Citizens UK's work on resettlement demonstrate its combination of managed but organically developed local actions.

### **Refugee Welcome Groups**

These groups were locally-led, while also displaying Citizens UK's management skills, in that they were largely created by experienced organisers, such as Bekele Woyecha. He described how they worked closely with global citizen campaigning platform Avaaz, reaching out to those with an interest and at times using 'cold-calling',<sup>53</sup> thus using organic roots and encouraging them to grow from the bottom-up. He also explained how they received specific Refugee Welcome training.<sup>54</sup> This would allow for greater management of actions.

These groups were later invited to join a Refugees Welcome Board and access further support from professional community organisers.<sup>55</sup> To do so they had to adopt the board's goals and create a locally tailored Refugee Welcome Plan,<sup>56</sup> allowing Citizens UK scope for control of the overall direction of their work. In an interview, an organiser pointed out how they could work together through a Facebook page for local co-chairs and encourage turn out for national actions: 'We could get 1000 people outside Parliament with a week's notice for the Restart the Rescue action'.<sup>57</sup> They could be likened to RCRC local branches, but the significant difference is that they are not volunteers, but rather, they are more fluid local networks, with greater autonomy to shape locally-tailored actions.

### **Replicated local actions**

Rather than all actions being devised at HQ level, the involvement of diverse organisations led to ideas for locally-driven actions, but which could subsequently be replicated and adapted by other local groups. An example is the Sukkot events, developed through the involvement of synagogues and local Jewish leaders, with many synagogues being members of Citizens UK. These events involved the creation and celebration of traditional huts (in which Jewish people are traditionally supposed to dwell during the week-long Sukkot festival in the autumn) in locations such as community centres, and the inviting of local council leaders and sympathetic groups such as student organisations. Woyecha noted how the invitations to

local politicians were managed by approaching them in advance and ensuring that they knew the nature of the event they were attending, thus avoiding the risk of damage to relationships.<sup>58</sup>

The Sukkot events have led to several local successes, such as Barnet becoming the first Conservative-led borough to pledge to take in more child refugees,<sup>59</sup> while the Leicester Sukkot resulted in a council pledge to support at least five child refugees for the subsequent ten years.<sup>60</sup> Such pledges were used to demonstrate to the national government that there was local council willingness on resettlement.

### **Compromise and cooperation**

In both the pragmatic Alinsky tradition and Citizens UK's adaptation, working with power holders formed part of its strategy. In interview, an organiser referred to examples of Citizens UK actions involving 'offering things' to win local council support.<sup>61</sup> For example, in July 2016, Redbridge Citizens held an event at a local church encouraging people to sign up as foster carers for refugee children, resulting in eighteen people putting their names forward.<sup>62</sup> This action was a practical step to offer the council support if they agreed to take in more children. Such actions formed part of the Safe Passage campaign strategy to show that councils were willing and able to take in greater numbers than the government had envisaged.

### **Local involvement in attracting influential people**

While various actions on resettlement attracted the support of the nationally famous, it is worth noting that national public figures may have local links and that these are more likely to lead to longer-term involvement. An example is actor Peter Capaldi, who became involved with Citizens UK's work on refugee sponsorship in Muswell Hill (North London), and even sponsored refugee families himself.<sup>63</sup> As Woyecha pointed out, 'the big folk can come on board due to local people', even though this aspect of their involvement may be less visible.<sup>64</sup> Large NGOs may benefit from greater awareness of this and how such locally-connected figures are likely to have greater knowledge of and commitment to a cause than those recruited through their agents, or who become involved only at an international level. Thus, it is a further reason to develop broader and deeper grassroots networks.

### **Adapting to new causes**

Citizens UK and its local groups have applied Alinsky's approach of creating networks of relationships

that can adapt for new causes. This approach is distinct from the partnership models of many large NGOs, whereby agreements to work with local actors are often limited to specific issues and time frames, meaning that new partnerships and agreements are necessary for future cooperation. In contrast, the Refugee Welcome groups have taken on the newer Sponsor Refugees campaign, in which they are organising locally to sponsor refugee families under the Government's scheme and campaigning for its expansion.

In interview, an organiser referred to the currently 'much more hostile climate around immigration and asylum', in which the government favours its own sponsorship and resettlement schemes rather than responding to unplanned arrivals of asylum seekers.<sup>65</sup> This organiser also noted that groups are 'picking up what's happening and where they can succeed'.<sup>66</sup> While this turning of attention to new issues could be viewed as acknowledgement of failure to push other aspects of resettlement further, it could equally be viewed as a strength of the deep sustained local roots resulting from managed community organising, whereby relationships exist that can be tapped into on new issues. In Woyecha's words 'relationships are everything'.<sup>67</sup>

Having explored various aspects of Citizens UK's work on refugee resettlement, several potential advantages are apparent when compared with the more limited grassroots involvement in many humanitarian diplomacy strategies. The main benefit of their combination of national management with organic local roots is the ability and scope for local groups to build their own relationships across communities, which have shown themselves to be long-term and adaptable to changes in the national and global climate. Furthermore, the authentic local involvement from a range of actors and groups has shown national government that there is a commitment to refugee resettlement across the UK and that it is not an issue to ignore. This local involvement has contributed to successes in extending the Dubs Scheme beyond its original end date and to government pledges to increase numbers of resettled refugee families. There are of course areas for further consideration and development. One is the extent to which local groups are representative of their communities, and to which Citizens UK's work on refugee resettlement demonstrates that diverse grassroots communities can become engaged on global issues that have no immediate direct impact on them. In interview, an organiser explained that Citizens UK's work in this area attracted people who had not previously been involved in refugee campaigns, and the creation

of Refugee Welcome groups included those more recently motivated by the events of 2015.<sup>68</sup> However, further research on the demographics of those involved would be useful.

An additional area for development is greater monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities to ascertain factors leading to successes. In interview, an organiser said that anecdotally it seems the Refugee Welcome groups with greater Citizens UK involvement were more successful, which would show the effectiveness of managed community organising.<sup>69</sup> However, the availability of more M&E resources would be useful. This is an area where community organisers could learn from humanitarian diplomats in the RCRC Movement and large NGOs, as such organisations have been able to use their larger resources to develop M&E. Therefore, the potential linkages between community organising and humanitarian diplomacy are not only one way.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This paper set out to explore whether the managed community organising of Citizens UK, rooted in the Alinsky approach, can provide a middle ground between top-down approaches to local involvement by organisations involved in humanitarian diplomacy, and more genuine grassroots forms of citizen activity that are prone to divisions, burnout, or may lack concrete demands or goals. Citizens UK's work on refugee resettlement suggests that linkages can be built between humanitarian diplomats and community organisers. Such linkages could create organised, focused, but authentically local 'citizen diplomats' who are motivated by issues beyond their immediate self-interest and localities. Furthermore, recognition of the local level may well increase due to the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, as Woyecha pointed out, has shown the importance of local relationships on which many have relied.

The case study explored here is introductory, but it points to potential for a form of humanitarian diplomacy jointly led and developed by a central organisation working with grassroots organisations and including more diverse groups and individuals. Such potential could be developed through mutual learning between those involved in humanitarian diplomacy in the RCRC Movement and large NGOs, and community organisers. This paper recommends mutual learning as it may lead to the creation of hybrid locally-rooted humanitarian-community groups comprised of individual trained citizen diplomats. Current debates in the humanitarian sector provide a conducive climate

for such mutual learning as some humanitarian thinkers and organisations are suggesting developments such as the 'network humanitarianism' of Paul Currian,<sup>70</sup> and proposals by Aid Reimagined Founder Arbie Baguios for 'organisers without borders' and citizens' assemblies to challenge the aid industry.<sup>71</sup> The potential of citizen diplomats' will be further explored through ongoing research into Citizens UK's work and other community organising models. This is not only because inclusivity and wider humanitarian education are good in themselves, but because the initial exploration in this paper suggests that such an approach could bring significant benefits to humanitarian diplomacy activities in a variety of contexts. The author also intends to broaden the scope of the research beyond humanitarian diplomacy and NGO advocacy work into an exploration of the potential of community organising and participatory education to drive reform of the wider aid sector. The COVID-19 pandemic, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the rise of an affluent middle class in the Global South demonstrate that humanitarian crises and extreme social inequalities exist everywhere, and that the local/international dichotomy driving discussions on aid sector reform may not be the most fruitful approach.

It is in this context of aid sector reform that the concept of 'citizen diplomat' could be broadened into 'citizen humanitarian', a new kind of humanitarian working in organisations that operate horizontally through mutual learning and aid, rather than the common current approach of Global North NGOs working with their 'local' partners in what are often top-down contractual models. Community organising could be coupled with a drive to increase access to literacy and civic education, and technology, so that those currently viewed as 'beneficiaries' to whom a 'voice' may be given can seize their own voices and contribute as 'citizen humanitarians' to the aid organisations of the future. While such a vision appears large in scope, the author intends to discover and disseminate practical and achievable first steps through the next phase of research.

## Author



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## Interviews

Interviews were carried out with the following three current/former Citizens UK community organisers:

- Anonymous community organiser – by telephone on 20 October 2020
- Pete Brierley (Lead community organiser) – by telephone on 26 October 2020
- Bekele Woyecha (Former Citizens UK community organiser and senior project manager, now director of UK Welcomes Refugees) – by Zoom on 11 November 2020 and follow-up by telephone on 21 December 2020

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