

Their nations are at war but here they work together

Cecily McNeill



Whether people whose countries are in conflict can overcome differences and work together in a far off country has been a challenge for a non-governmental organisation run by former refugees for refugees.

Formed in the aftermath of 9/11, as New Zealand's immigration criteria tightened, Wellington ChangeMakers Refugee Forum has managed to overcome parochial disputes to work together on a variety of projects including submissions to the government.

In March the group released its Standards for Engagement setting out expectations and guidelines for government and non-governmental agencies to engage effectively with refugee communities. Executive chair, Adam Awad, says the initiative has received a 'warm response'.

Although the impetus for the Standards arose out of a negative experience with an agency, the development of the guidelines has involved positive contributions from many government and non-governmental agencies.

The standards are for engagement with former refugees, but they could equally apply to other groups who negotiate with the government and NGOs from a relatively powerless position.

ChangeMakers is seeking to move refugees from being passive recipients of services and policies to active participants. In the past government representatives would seek consultation time after time but with seemingly little benefit for the refugees concerned.

'We are still struggling. In some areas we are still not receiving the service that we are entitled to, for example, in the mental health area,' says Adam.

He says that government agencies should not assume that they know the issues facing the refugees without listening to refugees themselves.

'We simply want government agencies and NGOs to listen to us more. We ask that government agencies and NGOs sit down with us and we will tell them how challenged we are in accessing their services.'

ChangeMakers is aiming for a new, more equal relationship with the government and NGOs. Refugees are becoming more involved in the development and delivery of the policies and services that affect them.

A founding member of ChangeMakers, Adam is from Somalia. He says that some members of Changemakers Refugee Forum come from countries in conflict with other countries, while others come from different cultural and religious groups within one country. Sometimes they are upset by media reports of conflicts back home.

'Occasionally it is very difficult to manage such a diverse group of people who may not always trust others within their own communities let alone people outside.'

Their origins in a male-dominated culture didn't help. But he says they all face the same resettlement issues.

He has negotiated in some challenging situations having, when still a teenager, led the construction of a refugee camp on the 'no man's land' border between Somalia and Ethiopia.

'That camp was the largest in East Africa at the time with more than 800,000 people including thousands of children who were orphaned and separated from their families and tribes.'

He was also an activist for social justice so had an edgy relationship with authorities in Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan. He studied in Sudan for a Bachelor of Business Administration sponsored by UNHCR.

'It's very sad to see people of the same origin, colour, faith and culture killing each other but at ChangeMakers we are demonstrating that people from different backgrounds can overcome these prejudices and work well together.'

He believes abuse of structural power is behind the corruption that forces people to behave as they do towards their fellow human beings.

In New Zealand he is keen to point out that the refugees ChangeMakers represents do not 'come here to sit around and take handouts'.

'We always work very hard to build up communities and bring in different groups for the common good of all people.'