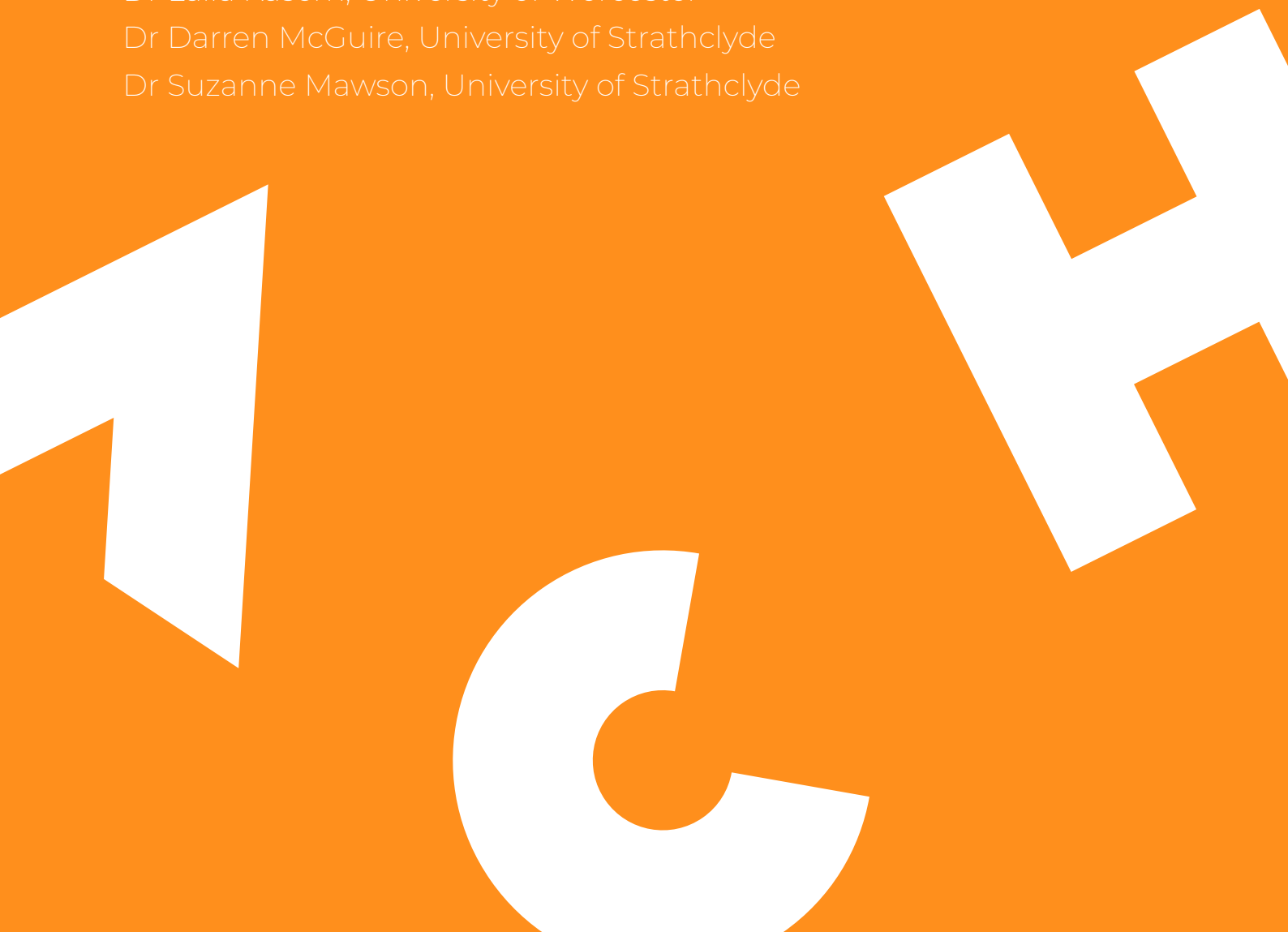

The Information Dissemination Project

Final evaluation | July 2022

Dr Laila Kasem, University of Worcester

Dr Darren McGuire, University of Strathclyde

Dr Suzanne Mawson, University of Strathclyde





About this evaluation

Context and background

Recent years have seen significant research interest in supporting refugee integration and participation in society (Hynie et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2020; Alencar, 2020). Indeed, the 2021 events in Afghanistan and 2022 events in Ukraine remind us of the global humanitarian importance of supporting refugees.


‘ACH’s ID Project was developed in response to the plight of taxi drivers in Bristol during the Covid-19 lockdown’

In the UK, successful integration is now considered a co-created process involving people and context (Hynie, 2018; Collyer et al., 2018; Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019), marking a shift towards contextually focused integration support (Ager & Strang, 2004).

Yet generic interventions and standardised post-arrival cultural orientations (Home Office, 2019, p.5) addressing language, housing and work (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019), reinforce integration outcomes at group, rather than individual level (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2021).

Despite the changing rhetoric, refugee integration support largely remains uni-directional, failing to address what refugees themselves want, need and value (Dubus, 2018). Hence, research is needed on how personal circumstances shape integration outcomes (Ortlieb et al., 2021).

ACH’s ID Project was developed in response to the plight of taxi drivers in Bristol during the Covid-19 lockdown, many of whom found themselves with little work and income. It also followed a recognition that many ethnic minority businesses did not access the emergency loans provided, at the time, by the UK government. The ID Project was designed to share information primarily, but not exclusively, with taxi drivers and small business owners, to support them gaining alternative employment to access Universal Credit and other available support. The ID Project leveraged community trust in ACH to facilitate informational flow to groups that may have been sceptical of government agencies and fearful of authority.



Quite quickly, the project widened its scope. This was, in part, driven by the volunteers recruited to the project who had direct communication with other groups (e.g. women in the community), and who identified a range of informational needs relating to the pandemic (e.g. information on public health, schooling, technological training, childcare etc.).

We also broadened our data collection beyond the ID project to consider the wider role of ACH. This report, therefore evaluates the role and impact of ACH in supporting refugees in the community, to lead lives of value and meaning in the face of a challenging context. Based on Amartya Sen's capability approach, analysis of documents, interviews with volunteers, workers, and a range of community members, the report documents the wide-ranging impact of ACH in and across the community.



The context of integration in the UK

There has been significant development in conceptualising and supporting refugee resettlement and integration in response to refugee migration (Allen et al., 2018). This is outside our scope to debate, but conceptualisation and definitions of integration (see Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018 for a concise review) highlight a longitudinal process (Bhatia & Ram, 2009; Phillimore, 2021), through which arrivals exercise rights and abilities to participate in society (Castles et al., 2002). Importantly, this is without relinquishing cultural identity (Strang & Ager, 2010).

Personal integration is facilitated or hindered by integration and settlement policies, but refugees remain susceptible to change in social and political contexts i.e. vulnerable arrival circumstances, challenges with language and a lack of social and economic resources (Hynie, 2018). In the UK, frameworks speak of integration as multi-dimensional, multi-directional, context specific and a shared responsibility (HM Government, 2018), partially remedying previous shortcomings (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019), which put the burden of adaptation on refugee communities. Integration indicators in the UK also treat integration as dependent on multiple factors, as no “one-size-fits-all” approach” works (Home Office, 2019, p.9).

Empirical research, nevertheless, indicates that generic interventions remain the norm (Bešić et al., 2022; Morrice et al., 2021), thus limiting individual-level support. Recent research by Strang and Quinn (2021), for example, identified that single refugee men from Iran and Afghanistan had low levels of contact with formal services, resulting in difficulties establishing trust and building relationships with support providers despite desiring such contact (UNHCR, 2013, 96). Research is therefore needed on how personal circumstances shape integration outcomes (Ortlieb et al., 2021).



Background to the Capabilities Approach

To understand the role and impact of ACH, we draw on Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach (CA), and his ideas of personal, social and environmental factors, that enable or constrain the development of flourishing lives. This section gives a brief overview of the key aspects of Sen's overarching framework and how it was utilised in the project. The CA is one of the most complete approaches to well-being analysis (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2020). As a framework, it gives a central role to a person's achievements and freedoms (Sen 2009, p.16), offering means of evaluating social arrangements, in terms of their ability to enable people to pursue lives that are meaningful (Klein, 2017).

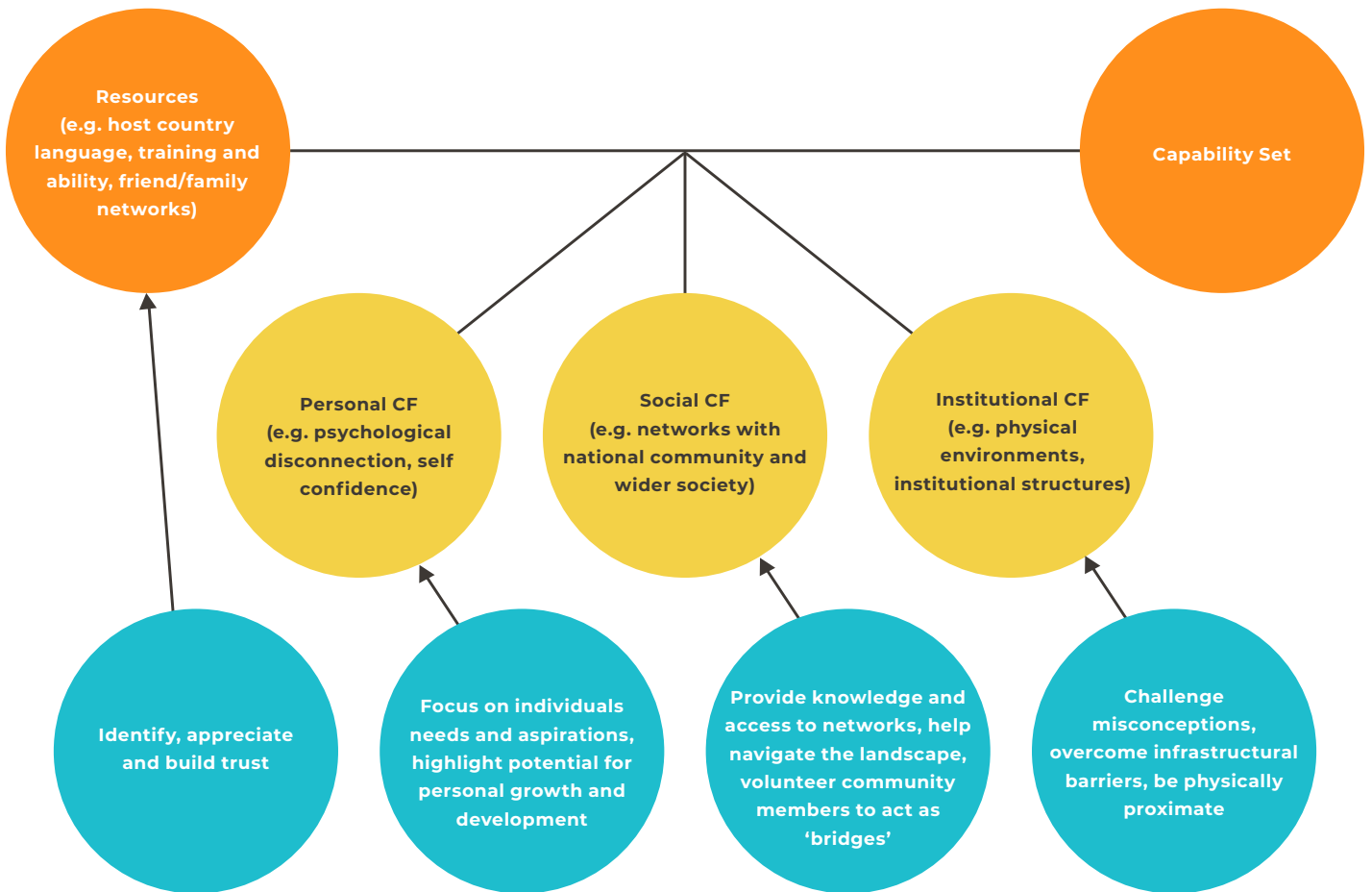
The term 'capability' explains the combinations of things a person is able to do or to be – the "functionings" he or she can achieve (Sen, 1993, p.30). Sen's CA comprises five building blocks: commodities, conversion factors, capabilities, choices (or agency), and functionings (Goerne, 2010). Commodities are tangible and intangible resources (e.g. money, goods, services, information, advice) from which capability sets are derived (Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 2006). Capabilities are the doings and beings people achieve, such as being well-nourished, getting married, being educated, and travelling (Robeyns, 2020). From these capabilities, people derive functionings and lives of value (Sen, 1985; 1999; Nussbaum, 2006). Sen views functionings as achievements (Sen, 1987, p.36) and the outcomes achieved, such as being healthy, having shelter, having a job, participating in social activities, travelling and so forth.

According to Sen (1999), and other advocates of the CA (e.g. Robeyns, 2005), three principal factors inhibit or encourage the conversion of commodities into capabilities and functionings. These are: personal factors, such as skills and physical condition; social factors, such as social norms and values, public policies, power relations and discrimination; and environmental factors, such as geographical characteristics, climate, and infrastructure. Conversion factors and their subsequent effects on personal agency, are unique to each person (Robeyns, 2005).

Perhaps the key value in using the capability approach in this way, relates to the focus on the individual. By focusing on commodities, for example, it is possible to appreciate the range of resources that refugees have or have access to when arriving in new societies, communities and homes. By examining conversion factors, it is possible to understand why some refugees are able to maximise the utility of their resources and achieve greater success in integration, while others cannot.

Overview of findings

Figure 1 draws our findings together to illustrate the nature of resources, and the conversion factors that support (or hinder) refugee integration and outlines the role that ACH plays in this process. It is important to note that the figure does not provide an exhaustive list of resources, conversion factors or support activities. However, it provides a CA-informed individual-level framing that can provide an understanding of critical factors in refugee integration and the role that business can play in the process.



Discussion of findings

Recognising and enriching refugee resources

Our research points towards a positive relationship between recognising and enriching individual resources and the capacity, through personal, social and environmental factors, to flourish in a new host society.

The literature and policy narratives recognise the strengths and skills that refugees bring to 'host countries' (Morrice et al., 2021; Ortlieb et al., 2021), but this is not normally reflected in support interventions. However, our evidence suggests that ACH staff prioritise understanding the wealth of personal experience and skills that refugees have, be it English-language skills, Master or PhD degrees, or personal self-efficacy and resilience.

Recognising and valuing these mostly intangible resources was critical in gaining the trust of refugees - a key facilitator of integration (Strang and Quinn, 2021) and avoiding psychological disconnection. Staff also provided people with resources, be it information about services available at ACH or elsewhere, or physical spaces including the offices as a space for meeting or accommodation.

Action Point

Create a comprehensive list of intangible resources that people accessing ACH's services and the broader refugee community may have, assess each refugee resource set and celebrate the existence of these resources to boost confidence and trust.



ACH's role in resource conversion

There are a range of conversion factors that facilitate or hinder the use of resources, including personal, social, and environmental aspects. As valuable as resources are, they are not always readily usable. For instance, refugees may have information about courses, but that does not mean that they can use that information to select what is suitable or register interests in a specific course.

Our evidence highlights that ACH played a key role in shaping personal factors through building self-confidence, recognising the potential for personal growth, promoting personal agency while mitigating against the risks of psychological disconnection.



Action Point

Create a comprehensive list of personal conversion factors, work with each refugee to highlight areas of strength or development needs, and support refugees to manage development needs.

Our data demonstrates that seemingly 'social' factors such as networks and community endorsement are also fundamentally linked to place and to institutions. In this context, ACH played a direct role by providing individuals and wider refugee communities with knowledge of, and access to, a wide range of support and wider networks that may have otherwise been unknown or even unreachable, drawing in this process on community members in a formalised volunteer capacity to act as 'bridges' between organisation and community. This facilitated a two-way communication resulting in greater understanding of community needs.

Action Point

Explore opportunities to draw on volunteers to act as 'bridges' between ACH and their diverse community of refugees.

Build the network of refugees by providing knowledge of, and access to, relevant people and organisations.

Unlike personal or social conversion factors, the role of a single institution in influencing environment conversion factors is usually somewhat limited. Yet, our data shows that ACH has challenged conventional wisdom underpinning the support environment by assisting refugees to achieve personal and career potential whilst attempting to overcome the technological and physical barriers constraining development of capabilities. This includes the provision of technological equipment or internet connection and being physically proximate to the community, particularly through the use of volunteers.

Action Point

Maintain the focus on maximising the career potential of refugees and being physically proximate to them.

ACH