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Mobile solidarities: The City of Sanctuary movement and the Strangers into Citizens campaign

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Mobile solidarities: The *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign

Findings of the Open University's Pavis Research Project, July 2009
Report written by Dr Vicki Squire

Summary of findings

Political and social concerns regarding the negative impact of migrants and asylum seekers on local communities have become widespread within the UK over recent years. What is often overlooked in such debates, however, is the growing significance of movements such as those associated with the *City of Sanctuary* network and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign, which both grow out of and also contribute to the construction of solidaristic relations between migrants, refugees and more established local residents. This report, which summarises the findings of a project into such movements led by Dr Vicki Squire at the Open University, suggests that migrants and refugees do not necessarily encounter hostility from 'host' communities, nor do they necessarily form discrete groups that need to be integrated within the wider community. Rather, migrants and refugees often engage with more established residents within localised city spaces in terms that render problematic distinctions between citizens/noncitizens; between cultural, ethnic or national groups; and between different migrant categories. The mobile solidarities associated with such movements thus challenge assumptions regarding the hostility of 'host' communities, as well as assumptions regarding the 'natural' division of community groups – assumptions on which contemporary integration and cohesion policies are founded.

The research found that:

- Both the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign highlight the difficulties that migrants and refugees face in the UK today, and strive to change opinions regarding asylum and migration in order to support the inclusion of migrants and refugees and/or the extension of migrant and refugee rights

- While the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign differ in terms of the ways in which they approach this task and in terms of the actions that the take in furthering their respective causes, both emerge out of a series of localised engagements between newly arriving migrants/refugees and more established residents that are of a reciprocal or shared nature

- The main successes of the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign lie in their ability to mobilise those whom are excluded

from mainstream politics, as well as in their ability to translate their demands in terms that are broadly acceptable to mainstream politicians and/or public opinion

- The main challenges that the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign face are in remaining inclusive while maintaining a position that is acceptable to the mainstream, and in extending the reach of the movement beyond the localised city spaces within which their supporting organisations engage.

Background

The *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign both emerge in a context whereby asylum seekers and irregular migrants have been widely stigmatised within the UK. Asylum and migration have formed the focus of intense political and social scrutiny over the past two decades, where fears about rising numbers have often been at the forefront of debate. Public opinion toward asylum and migration has often been negative in this regard, while the popular press has been particularly hostile to asylum seekers and migrants whose status is irregular.

Policy responses to asylum and migration have, in this context, been torn between restriction and liberalisation. On the one hand, border controls have been extended to inhibit unauthorised entrance while internal measures such as the withdrawal of asylum seekers' rights to work have reduced the ability of some new arrivals to participate within 'host' communities. On the other hand, the opening of migration routes for groups such as EU nationals and the highly skilled have moved policy in a more liberal and inclusive direction. Based on a separation of migration into its 'productive' or 'harmless' and its 'unproductive' or 'problematic' elements, this policy response has contributed over recent years to the development of a harsh environment for asylum seekers and for irregular migrants in particular. It is this environment that the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign strive to transform.

Despite the role of asylum and immigration policies in constituting the UK as a harsh environment for some new arrivals, the development of integration and cohesion policies might be interpreted as part of an attempt to render the UK a more welcoming environment for migrants and refugees. This has been linked to a process of decentralisation, whereby local authorities and agencies are increasingly responsible for the task of implementing integration and cohesion policies. It is within this context of the localisation of integration and cohesion policies that the importance of localised city spaces lies. Specifically, localised city spaces that are engaged by groups associated with the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign (such as the church, the school or the café) are important because they are characterised by the formation of mobile relations of solidarity in which distinctions between citizens/non-citizens, between different national or cultural groups, and between different migrant categories begin to

unravel. In this regard, mobile solidarities of the sort evident in *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens* exceed the terms of existing integration and cohesion policies.

History, organisation and aims of *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens*

Both the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign were launched in the mid-2000s, and are composed by a coalition of member organisations or civic institutions which support the main aims and objectives of the movement or campaign. The main difference between the two relates to the specific migrant category toward which each is orientated, as well as to the organisational form and the specific actions undertaken by each movement. While *City of Sanctuary* is a movement that seeks to extend a positive vision of sanctuary through promoting relationships between local people and people seeking sanctuary, *Strangers into Citizens* is a campaign that seeks the regularisation of irregular migrants through lobbying activities such as petitioning and demonstrating.

City of Sanctuary
The *City of Sanctuary* movement originated in Sheffield, which in 2007 became the first UK *City of Sanctuary* with the support of Sheffield City Council and over 70 organisations. The formation of a city or town as a City of Sanctuary is based on the commitment of member organisations and groups, as well as on support from local politicians and the active participation of refugees and refugee groups. Thus, in order to qualify 'officially' as a *City of Sanctuary*, a city or town has to achieve the four following goals: (1) "Resolutions of support from a significant and representative proportion of local groups and organisations"; (2) "The support and involvement of local refugee communities, and refugee representation on the local City of Sanctuary working group"; (3) "A resolution of support from the City Council (or other Local Authority)"; (4) "A strategy, agreed by the main supporting organisations, for how the city is to continue working towards greater inclusion of refugees and people seeking sanctuary" (Barnett and Bhogal, 2009: 79).

In July 2009 a national network of local groups in 10 cities throughout the UK formed part of this "movement to build a culture of hospitality for people seeking sanctuary in the UK", the primary aim of which is to "influence policy-makers and public attitudes throughout the country" (www.cityofsanctuary.org). While the movement does disseminate information about campaigns that support its overarching aims and objectives, *City of Sanctuary* explicitly avoids political lobbying or campaigning in favour of a more subtle process of transforming culture. This effectively consists of a bottom-up approach to political change, which is based on building a culture of hospitality and sanctuary at a local level through coalition building and through the creation of opportunities for building personal relationships between local people and those seeking sanctuary (Barnett and Bhogal, 2009: 83).

Strangers into Citizens

While *City of Sanctuary* is a movement that explicitly avoids lobbying or campaigning, *Strangers into Citizens* is a national campaign calling for the one-off regularisation of irregular migrants, and thus undertakes more traditional lobbying activities. Launched in the autumn of 2006 by the *London Citizen* branch of the national *Citizens Organising Foundation* and supported by church organisations, trade unions and migrant support groups, the campaign has been endorsed by the Liberal Democrat Party as well as by the London Mayor, Boris Johnson. The main aim of the campaign is to create a "pathway to citizenship" for irregular migrants who have resided in the UK for 4 years or more. The campaign calls for such individuals to be granted 2 years 'leave to remain', during which time they are able to work legally and "demonstrate their contribution to UK economy and society". The campaign advocates that such individuals should be considered for permanent leave to remain at the end of this period, subject to their "knowledge of English and employer and community references" (www.stangersintocitizens.org.uk/the-campaign).

While *Strangers into Citizens* clearly differs from *City of Sanctuary* because it is a campaign rather than a movement, the differences between the two are perhaps less stark than initially appears to be the case. In organisational terms, the two are not dissimilar because each is formed from a coalition of member groups and organisations (in the terms used by *City of Sanctuary*) or of civic organisations and institutions (in the terms used by *Strangers into Citizens*). The *Strangers into Citizens* campaign, as noted above, is one that is organised by the London branch of the *Citizens Organising Foundation*, which is a movement based on an alliance of civic organisations and whose mission is to "create a network of competent, informed and organised citizens who act responsibly in the public life of their communities and are able to influence, for the common good, decisions that impact on their communities" (www.cof.org.uk). *Strangers into Citizens* is thus a campaign that emerges out of broad-based movement which brings together various local civil society organisations such as congregations, union branches, schools, and local associations. As such, it both constructed and supported by member institutions on the basis of challenges that are faced and solidarities that are constructed in the localised city spaces with which they engage. *Strangers into Citizens* and *City of Sanctuary* can thus be approached as similar movements that emerge out of a series of localised mobile engagements between newly arriving migrants/refugees and more established residents that are of a reciprocal form.

Successes

The main success of the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign/*London Citizens* movement lies in their ability to mobilise diverse groups and individuals whom are excluded from mainstream politics. In addition both groups have been successful in challenging (preconceptions of) existing legal distinctions and social relations, while remaining broadly acceptable to mainstream politicians and/or public opinion.

The active participation of irregular migrants and asylum seekers within each of the movements is important because it entails the mobilisation of those excluded from mainstream politics. Such participation is facilitated by the organisational structure of each movement, which allows for the involvement of people regardless of their legal status. Both the *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *Citizens Organising Foundation* are organised around groups and institutions such as religious congregations, schools, youth groups, trade union groups, refugee community organisations and migrant support groups. Because of this, asylum seekers and irregular migrants are free to participate within each movement on an equal basis to citizens, based on their involvement with a particular group or institution or based upon their engagement with members of such groups or institutions within a localised city space. The parameters of who can act as a citizen are thus reconfigured through the activities of these movements. This is no more evident than in *London Citizens*, whereby the difference between those with status and those without is rendered irrelevant to the point whereby the deportation of the most active local citizens can be the first moment where such distinctions become visible within the movement itself. As one London Citizens organiser described: "We had a whole family deported last year and they were so vital for the campaign, because they mobilise a lot of the Latino communities and none of us knew that they weren't documented." (Interview with West London Citizens organiser: 26-7).

There are clearly some limitations to the equal participation of those with and those without status within each movement. For example, those without a legal right to work would not be able to take up paid employment within either movement. However, this does not produce a marked divide where the number of paid employees is limited.[1] More limiting in terms of the involvement of asylum seekers and irregular migrants are additional pressures that leave some unable or unwilling to make a commitment to the movements. Many asylum seekers and irregular migrants are keen to avoid activities that may draw attention to their whereabouts, status and/or activities. In particular, migrants who have experienced political violence often have reasons why they want to avoid engaging in political activities. Migrants also face significant challenges in terms of their everyday survival that prevent their full involvement in social movements such as *City of Sanctuary* or *London Citizens*. As the Chair of *City of Sanctuary* suggested: "They don't have that luxury, their priorities [are to] actually save themselves, [they are] doing all they can, and they're all embroiled in complicated processes which take a lot of their time and energy and effort" (interview with the Chair of *City of Sanctuary*: 12). Nevertheless, the picture tends to be mixed in this regard, and there is clear evidence of the engagement of both asylum seekers and irregular migrants within *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens* movements. One of the key successes of the movements in this respect lies in their ability to engage those who are excluded from mainstream politics; specifically in their engagement of such groups in terms that do not distinguish between those who are and those who are not granted the right of political mobilisation by the state.

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[1] *City for Sanctuary* has only two paid part-time employees, while *Citizens Organising Foundation* has ** employees across London.

Related to this, a success of both *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens* lies in their ability to challenge (preconceptions of) existing legal distinctions and social relations, while remaining broadly acceptable to mainstream politicians and/or to mainstream public opinion. While both movements limit their focus to a particular sub-category of migrants – forced migrants in the case of *City of Sanctuary* and irregular migrants in the case of *Strangers into Citizens* – each movement effectively undermines such legal distinctions due to their emergence out of a series of engagements or encounters that involve people whom often do not fit neatly into such categories. In other words, the very legal distinctions that the movements employ to publicise their cause are effectively challenged by the mobile solidarities that are inherent to the formation of the movements in the first place. For example, in the case of *City of Sanctuary* the distinction between citizens and those seeking sanctuary is partially undermined by the coming together of such groups as members of a local community "working for a culture of hospitality" (Barnett and Bhogal, 2009: 83). In the case of *Strangers into Citizens*, the distinction between citizens and irregular migrants is also blurred, as indicated in the last section. Indeed, the very distinction between irregular migrant and the person seeking sanctuary is less clear-cut than the official terminology of each movement implies. This is implicitly acknowledged in the *London Citizens*'s setting up of a campaign parallel to that of *Strangers into Citizens* called *Citizens for Sanctuary*, as well as in the *City of Sanctuary*'s acknowledgement that building a culture of hospitality will benefit "other migrant groups" beyond those seeking sanctuary as well as "host communities" (Barnett and Bhogal, 2009: 83).

City of Sanctuary and *Strangers into Citizens* do not only provide a (somewhat ambiguous) challenge to existing legal distinctions between citizens and non-citizens and between different types of migrants, but so also do they provide a more explicit challenge to (pre-conceptions of) existing social relations. Specifically, they challenge both the assumption of and the existence of social relations that are marked by hostility towards, and a fear of, mobile populations or groups from 'different' cultures. This challenge is explicit in *City of Sanctuary*'s objective of changing public opinion by creating the political space for sanctuary within which a culture of hospitality can flourish. It is also implicit in actions carried out by the movement, such as awareness raising workshops in schools, cultural and social events involving refugee groups, interfaith events around sanctuary, and civic receptions for new arrivals (Barnett and Bhogal, 2009: 84). Similarly, relations of hostility and a response to new arrivals based on fear are explicitly challenged in *Strangers into Citizens'* call for the regularisation of irregular migrants. The main difference between *Strangers into Citizens* and *City of Sanctuary* is the level at which the challenge is explicitly posed: the former pose the challenge to policy makers while the latter pose it both to politicians and to society at large. Nevertheless, both *Strangers into Citizens* and *City of Sanctuary* create a more fundamental challenge than one that simply calls for the constitution of alternative social relations to those based on hostility and fear. The very emergence of *Strangers into Citizens* and *City of Sanctuary* in itself raises questions as to whether the assumption of hostility – namely that hostility is an inevitable result of new arrivals or the existence of mobile populations – is an accurate one on which to base policy. After all, both movements emerge out of a

series of localised engagements between newly arriving migrants/refugees and more established residents (or between citizens and noncitizens) that are of a reciprocal or shared nature. This is in itself indicative of the existence of mobile solidarities that exceed the hostilities and divisions that current cohesion and integration policies assume.

Despite these deep-rooted challenges that *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens* raise, both have been remarkably successful in gaining mainstream support for their cause. As stated above, *Strangers into Citizens* has gained the support of national and regional politicians, as well as having been endorsed by leading religious figures within the Catholic community. It has also been supported by a range of member institutions across London, and has garnished the support of 15,000 people at a demonstration in London on 7 May 2007. *City of Sanctuary* has similarly gained significant support from Local Councils and local organisations, resulting in a rapid growth in the number of cities working as part of the network toward their qualification as a City of Sanctuary since the movement was launched in 2005.[2] This is evidence of the success of both *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens* in articulating their causes in a way that is largely acceptable to mainstream policy makers and mainstream public opinion.

Challenges

One of the main challenges facing *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens* relates to their very success in articulating their causes in a way that is acceptable to the mainstream. That is, their explicit commitment to the maintenance of a position that is acceptable to mainstream policy and public opinion potentially undermines the important challenges that they pose when it comes to issues of mobility, citizenship, sanctuary and integration/cohesion. For example, this problem potentially emerges where *City of Sanctuary* emphasise their commitment to "offering a place of safety for people whose lives are threatened" over their emphasis on "working for a culture of hospitality" that will benefit all those engaging within localised city spaces (Barnett and Bhogal, 2009: 83). By maintaining a position that remains within the acceptable confines of mainstream definitions of who can and cannot qualify as a person seeking sanctuary, the *City of Sanctuary* movement risks reaffirming distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' refugees that are central to the formation of the exclusionary approaches which the movement seeks to challenge. The inclusivity of *City of Sanctuary* is thus put under question where the emphasis is on developing a movement whose cause fits comfortably within the mainstream.

This problem is more stark when it comes to the position adopted by *Strangers into Citizens*, whose attempt to develop a policy proposal that is acceptable to the mainstream bring to bear qualifications that significantly limit the inclusivity of the

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[2] At the time of writing Sheffield was the only city qualifying as a City of Sanctuary, with Bradford, Coventry and Swansea being close to qualification and with local authorities having endorsed the City of Sanctuary initiative in Sheffield, Bradford, Oxford and Swansea.

campaign. *Strangers into Citizens* has been widely criticised by activists on the left for the exclusions that emerge as part of their commitment an "earned amnesty". The specific proposals developed as part of the campaign do reaffirm distinctions between 'harmless' and 'problematic' migrants as well as between 'deserving' and 'underserving' migrants. The critical reach of a one-off regularisation is thus questionable, and some of its qualifications problematic. Nevertheless, a consideration of the way that the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign has developed out of *London Citizens*' struggles on the ground is important. If the regularisation campaign is examined as part of a longer history of struggles by *London Citizens*, such as the *London Living Wages* campaign (which began in 2001 and which bought to the fore the issue of the precarity of irregular migrants), as well as the current *Citizens for Sanctuary* campaign (which is conceived of as complementary to the regularisation campaign), the limitations of the "earned amnesty" can perhaps be put into context. While the limitations and problematic distinctions of a mainstream campaign designed for adoption by policy-makers is clearly apparent in *Strangers for Citizens*, there is also a strategic element to the campaign that needs to be considered from the perspective of many of those whom experience precarity and/or marginalisation.

In addition to the challenge in navigating the mainstream, *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens/London Citizens* also face a significant challenge in extending their reach beyond the city spaces within which their supporting organisations and institutions engage. In particular, the predominance of faith-based organisations within both of the movements appears to be a limitation in terms of which groups and individuals they engage. Both movements are marked by a predominance of faith organisations, such as churches or mosques and faith schools. Both movements are also marked by a predominance of Christian faith organisations, although neither movement is homogenous in this regard. There have been some successes in branching out more widely beyond these groups by both movements. *London Citizens* in particular has successfully involved trade union branches, student unions and residents' associations, while *City of Sanctuary* has successfully involved refugee support groups and is working to bring in businesses as part of their coalition of supporting organisation. The challenges that are faced in terms of extending the reach of the movements beyond existing networks are thus already recognised in this regard. However, what the movements are perhaps less well equipped to address is their inability to reach those migrants and refugees whose presence in city spaces is fleeting, sporadic and/or imperceptible. The invisibility and impermanence of mobile populations is thus an issue that *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens* need to address if they are to extend their reach to those whom most acutely experience the effects of exclusionary policies. To do so, however, may be to undermine some of the assumptions on which such movements struggle to ground themselves.

Recommendations

An analysis of *City of Sanctuary* and *Strangers into Citizens/London Citizens* indicates that local city spaces are often marked by the construction of mobile solidarities, in which distinctions between citizens/noncitizens, between cultural, ethnic or national groups, and between different migrant categories begin to unravel. Based on this insight, the following recommendations are designed to take seriously the challenges posed by relations of hostility and fear without reifying them as a necessary presupposition:

- Integration/cohesion policies should not be based on the assumption that established communities will be hostile to new arrivals. Nor should such policies be based on the assumption that communities are divided along cultural, ethnic, or national lines.
- Instead, there should be a significant attempt to highlight and foster mobile solidarities such as those displayed in the localised city spaces engaged by the movements studied in this project.
- This strategy can serve as an alternative to one based on the attempt to distinguish 'harmless' from 'problematic' migrants, of the sort that we have seen over recent years. It can also serve as a means by which contemporary notions of citizenship, sanctuary and integration can be critically reconfigured

About the report

This report presents the findings of a qualitative project led by Dr Vicki Squire of the Open University which was carried out from January-July 2009. The research is based on a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with participants within the Sheffield *City of Sanctuary* movement and the *London Citizens* movement. These interviews were complemented with observations and documentary analysis. Thanks are extended to Dr Louise Richards, whom supported and carried out interviews and observations for this project, and whom undertook some background research for this report. Thanks are also extended to all those from *City of Sanctuary* and the *London Citizens* who supported this research, in particular to Craig Barnett. More detailed analyses of these cases are due to be published as academic journal articles. If you would like to receive further information about these, or if you have any other queries about this research, please contact Vicki Squire at the Open University: v.j.squire@open.ac.uk.

References
Barnett, C. and Bhogal, I. (2009) *Becoming a City of Sanctuary: A Practical Handbook with Inspiring Examples* (Plug and Tap Publishers: Ripon).