The voluntary sector is known to be a crucial component in the settlement of refugees (Balloch, 1993; Carey-Wood et al., 1995) and has been of paramount importance in the lives of refugee people. It has been especially crucial in the absence of formal and ongoing statutory reception and resettlement provisions. The provision for forced migrants on arrival tends to be ad hoc and much of the responsibility in the past has been placed on community organizations (Renton, 1993; Wahlbeck, 1997a). Moreover, because many refugees arrive in the host society without kinship ties and support networks, the role of community organizations is key in the early stages of settlement. As we saw in Chapter 4, the majority of respondents had not made a positive choice about coming to the UK and more than half had arrived alone. Moreover, only a few had heard about organizations that could help them on arrival. As a result, refugees who arrive spontaneously in the UK and seek asylum, actively seek out people from their own communities and community organizations to help them with many of their needs in the early stages of settlement. This chapter will examine the role of refugee community organizations in the lives of forced migrants in Newham.

The role of refugee community organizations

The voluntary sector has a number of roles of which one is to cater for the diversity of need within the community. Refugee community groups and organizations tend to emerge to fill the gaps in mainstream provision. For such organizations to form there have to be sufficient numbers of a particular community in any given locality. Research carried out in Germany, a country that has operated dispersal policies
since 1993, found that only the longer-established communities were able to set up a structure of self-help organizations. This was because compulsory dispersal to Länder (states) around the country left insufficient numbers of any one community to build up organizations (Düvell, 1994). One of the concerns about the current UK policy of dispersal is that asylum seekers are removed from access to community-based organizations that tend to be located in the larger urban centres, particularly in London.

The functions undertaken by refugee community organizations are diverse. Activities include the provision of information, advice and advocacy, mediation between clients and other agencies, interpretation and translation, opportunities for social, cultural and political activities, the chance to meet and exchange news from home as well as education and training (Carey-Wood et al., 1995; Duke et al., 1999; Wahlbeck, 1997b).

Community organizations often provide specialist services where statutory and generic voluntary provision is not appropriate or does not meet the needs of a group or community. Refugee community groups are usually managed by people from the same ethnic group and tend to be specific to religion, nationality, ethnic group and in some instances political ideology. Some refugee community organizations cater for the needs of specific clients such as women, disabled people and older people. At the time of the study, funding for community organizations came from a number of sources including the Single Regeneration Budget as shown earlier. The other main sources of funding for community organizations are local authorities, the Home Office and the London Boroughs Grants Unit. In addition, other public and private programmes support work with refugees, though insufficient funding is a major obstacle to the work of this sector (Wahlbeck, 1997b).

**Refugee community organizations in Newham**

Newham has a very active network of voluntary and community based organizations. However, there is less provision for the Congolese community than for the longer established Somali and Tamil communities. Community groups tend to have a local rather than a national or international remit and tend to be orientated towards host society settlement. However, some organizations were also part of an active international diasporic network concerned with political activities in the country of origin.