

Manchester Migrant Solidarity & African Rainbow Family

Impact & learning report 2020

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Introduction

About this report

This report provides a brief introduction to [Manchester Migrant Solidarity](#) (MiSol) and [African Rainbow Family](#) (ARF) and an overview of the work the organisations have carried out in 2020. It describes the impact that MiSol/ARF's work has had on its Members and what has been learned from this.

The report has been written by an independent consultant, Sophie Ahmad, with support from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. It draws on interviews with MiSol/ARF's Founder and six of its nine Coordinators/Assistant Coordinators, and on a discussion group with 14 other Members (from MiSol in Manchester and ARF's four branches in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham and London).

This is the first time that MiSol/ARF have produced an impact and learning report and the first time that Members have been invited to share their perspectives as part of an independent process. It is hoped that this report will be of interest to Members of MiSol/ARF, and their partners and funders. Although this has been a relatively brief, limited, exercise, it is hoped that it will prove useful in informing future approaches to evaluation and learning at both organisations.

The founding of MiSol/ARF

MiSol and ARF are sister organisations, founded in 2014 by the human rights activist, feminist and LGBTIQ equality advocate Aderonke Apata. The drive to create both organisations came from Aderonke's personal experience of being detained in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre in 2012, after her claim for asylum was refused. Aderonke had sought asylum in the UK following the introduction of draconian anti-gay laws in her country of origin, Nigeria (changes that were also introduced in other Commonwealth countries across Africa). The Home Office had tried to argue that Aderonke was lying about being in a lesbian relationship in order to avoid removal from the UK.

Aderonke was shocked by the lack of humanity at Yarl's Wood, where the automatic assumption of those in charge was that the people detained there were not to be believed. She began to read and translate official letters for other detainees who had nowhere else to turn for support. Although meetings between detainees were not strictly allowed, Aderonke seized whatever opportunities arose for them to share their experiences and help each other. After two particularly upsetting incidents, one in which a heavily pregnant woman was ignored when she said her waters had broken and another when a woman was overpowered by a team of male officers and forcibly removed, naked, to the airport, a spontaneous demonstration ensued, which Aderonke coordinated. The action, supported from the outside by various campaigning organisations, was successful and many of the detainees' demands were met. However, Aderonke was imprisoned for several months for her role in it. When a further asylum claim was refused and she was issued with a deportation order, Aderonke appealed to the High Court herself and was eventually released on bail after a year in Yarl's Wood.

Aderonke's experience in detention convinced her of the value of self-help for people experiencing the harshest end of the immigration system. While partnerships with individuals and organisations with 'learned experience' will always be important, she feels strongly that people who have direct experience of the system have unique insight into its failings and what needs to change. After a period of time establishing a new branch of another organisation in Manchester, Aderonke took the plunge and in 2014 set up Manchester Migrant Solidarity and African Rainbow Family, two organisations run for and by people with lived experience of the asylum and immigration system in the UK. Aderonke continues to act as Chair for both organisations. She was finally granted asylum in the UK in 2017.

About the two organisations

MiSol and ARF work closely together, with some Members belonging to both organisations.

MiSol is conceived as a "convergence space" for people who have migrated to the UK (including people seeking asylum) to come together with non-migrants for mutual support, solidarity, and to challenge injustice in the immigration system. The organisation hosts social events, offers awareness-raising workshops, provides language assistance, supports those in detention, and mobilises against deportations. As a campaigning organisation rather than a charity, MiSol is free to speak out boldly and challenge the government when it fails to live up to the UK's long tradition of upholding human rights. MiSol supports around 100 people a year through its various activities.

ARF is a charity and self-help collective that focuses specifically on the advancement of LGBTIQ people who have migrated to the UK or are seeking asylum here, and on the education of the public about the issues affecting this group. ARF works to promote mental health and wellbeing, relieve poverty and address unemployment among LGBTIQ people who have been granted status by providing advice, support and vocational and skills training. Despite its name and initial focus on those of African heritage, the organisation supports people from a range of Black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups.

ARF was founded by Aderonke after she discovered that all of the LGBTIQ support groups in Manchester were white-led. Despite leaders' best intentions, Aderonke found that cultural differences sometimes meant that people of colour held back from expressing their views openly in these forums. ARF provides social events and free counselling, and helps Members read and make sense of official letters, find a solicitor and access mainstream services. It offers subsistence support for people who are not allowed to work, have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and are facing destitution. It supports people required to sign on at immigration reporting centres and those held in detention, and it provides moral support and evidence for people making appearances at court. ARF also organises an annual conference and conducts a range of influencing activity, often in partnership with MiSol.

ARF now has four branches across the country, in Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and London. Each branch is run by a volunteer Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator who are elected by the membership. The branches grew organically, as word spread about the work the organisation was doing from its Manchester HQ. Rather than attempting to run the

other branches herself, Aderonke trained up local leaders to run their own activities. Across the four locations, ARF now supports around 500 people a year to seek asylum. To date, around 350 people who have been supported by ARF have been successfully granted asylum and now have refugee status.

In the rest of this report, the views of Coordinators/Assistant Coordinators are distinguished from those of Members. However, all Coordinators are also Members of MiSol/ARF.

Milestones in MiSOL/ARF's journey to date

Manchester Migrant Solidarity (MiSol)

2014

African Rainbow Family (ARF)

2014: MiSol & ARF founded by Aderonke Apata

2015

2016: MiSol makes written & oral submissions to the Parliamentary inquiry into the use of indefinite immigration detention in the UK, hosted by the APPGs on Refugees & Migration

2016

2016: MiSol plays a leading role in the campaign to shut down Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre

2017

2017: ARF organises its first annual conference, in Manchester, attracting high-profile speakers & a large number of participants

2017: ARF Birmingham branch opens

2018

2018: MiSol & ARF receive largest single grant so far (£25K over 3 years) from PHF & Oglesby Charitable Trust. Oglesby secures office space in Manchester for both groups

2018

2018: Reach Out Leeds becomes Leeds branch of ARF

2019: ARF London branch opens & group moves into old Clerkenwell Fire Station

2020

Feb 2020: MiSol & ARF appoint first f/t staff member (working across both organisations)

March 2020: Covid-19 shifts work online. Emergency funding enables Coordinators to receive small weekly payment for first time

2021

Key learning pre 2020

My lawyer works for me

Most people who approach MiSol/ARF for support have a fairly limited understanding of their rights and entitlements. They also tend to be quite deferent to their legal teams, rarely feeling comfortable to challenge them openly. This knowledge and power imbalance means that legal teams often miss out on important details of a case that clients don't have the confidence to share. At worst, it leaves clients at risk of abuse from unscrupulous lawyers. At both MiSol and ARF, the Founder and Coordinators have worked hard to increase Members' understanding of their rights and ensure they are aware that their lawyer works for them and should listen to what they have to say.

"Many people struggle to tell officials their story at meetings, because they haven't been represented well or they are worried about saying particular things. So, we sit down together, and people tell me their story and then I write it down and read it back to them to check I've got it right...We also chase solicitors. If cases aren't going anywhere, we can ring them up and find out what's happening. It all helps to get a better response from solicitors." (Coordinator)

"It brings us together for education, to learn about policies, to get involved in workshops. It has motivated me to talk about my rights as a person, MiSol did this, it empowered me." (Member)

An alternative family

Members who took part in discussions for this report emphasised the value of sharing experiences with other people who have been through similar things. While practical and financial support from MiSol/ARF is clearly valued, emotional support and connection is key for people who are often entirely alone in the UK and many of whom have been disowned by their family. Members describe the organisations as a community, an alternative family, or a home, that provides respite and relief, and helps to reduce isolation. They emphasise the caring, non-judgemental, way in which support is provided, which helps to foster self-acceptance, confidence and resilience.

"I joined MiSol when I was destitute and homeless. I wanted help with my immigration case, and it was also an opportunity to greet people. I have only good feedback...I have found a family, my brothers and sisters. I can take something to the group and there will always be someone who's been through the same thing. I really appreciate that." (Member)

"I was feeling very lonely...That was the main reason (I joined) to be honest. It has been very helpful. It is my family. If I faced any problems, before thinking of any solicitor they are the first people I will call to get help. It makes me feel reassured, helps me relax, with less stress. They have helped me financially, emotionally and physically. They have kept me sane. They have done a wonderful job for us. I have not been here long, but I feel so much better since I started. I just don't know where I would be without them". (Member)

“It has exceeded my expectations. I wanted a space to talk about my experiences, but it turned out like a family. They...support you emotionally, but without making you feel bad or different.” (Member)

“I have got to know lots of people, to make friends, and also to be strong in myself...All I know is that it changed my life, meeting African Rainbow Family. I feel at home each time we meet each other”. (Coordinator)

Everyone has something to give

For MiSol/ARF’s Founder, Aderonke, supporting Members means lifting them up. Rather than creating dependency, she has been keen to encourage Members to take ownership of their own lives and futures. This has meant asking them about their skills and previous experiences and deliberately and intentionally finding ways to build on this. It has also meant Aderonke consciously stepping back at times and allowing others to lead, even if this means it takes longer to achieve things in the short term. Doing this has allowed Members to grow in confidence and begin to see themselves not as passive recipients of support but as people who have something important to contribute to MiSol/ARF and to the wider community.

“I’ve learned a lot since I started working at MiSol/African Rainbow Family. I’ve learned about the immigration system in this country. I’ve learned about different cultures and nationalities and Aderonke has given me lots of opportunities to speak, to represent her at meetings, to have exposure to other organisations and their work... I’ve got my status now but I’m not going anywhere. I want to use my skills to help other people”. (Coordinator)

“I can say that I love being part of African Rainbow Family. It has taught me so many things. It has opened my eyes to all the different organisations that exist, and how the funding works, and it has broadened my mind and made me feel connected”. (Coordinator)

The importance of safe spaces

As organisations run for and by people with lived experience of the UK’s immigration and asylum system, MiSol and ARF offer a safe space for Members to discuss their experiences without having to explain or justify themselves to others who might not understand what they have been through. This seems to be especially important to Members of ARF, who may have experienced particular discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as their status as migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum.

“It’s really important to have our own space. It’s very difficult for a person to talk openly, a gay woman from my background. It’s very hard to say to anyone, to an official. That’s impossible. You need to say it, but it’s very hard”. (Coordinator)

“African Rainbow Family, being part of this feels very big... We have all been disowned by our parents, there is this stigma you carry from Africa, but now you have this family, these people who want to support you.” (Coordinator)

“For African gays and lesbians, it’s very important to be confidential, they don’t want to be exposed. Also, for Muslim people and Arab people who are gay and lesbian. So Aderonke made African Rainbow Family for LGBT people. It is very...important to be safe”.
(Coordinator)

Power dynamics are everywhere

While ARF was formed as a safe space for people who identify as LGBTIQ, Aderonke feels it is important to acknowledge that power dynamics and hierarchies play themselves out here too, even among people who have experienced oppression in their own community. Race, gender, class and other aspects of identity or experience can always divide people unless deliberate action is taken to ensure this does not happen. The Founder and Coordinators have found that acknowledging differences, clearly conveying shared values and being prepared to call out behaviour that does not live up to them, have been crucial in tackling problematic power dynamics where they have arisen.

“There are lots of differences in people’s backgrounds, but lots of similarities too. You have to look through it, you have to adapt. You see people come in and initially it’s difficult for people to adapt, but then you see everyone become a family, blending. The group is a family. They are there for each other. It’s not about where you are coming from.” (Coordinator)

The importance of joy

While Members have emphasised the value of being able to talk openly about difficult issues and experiences, they have also highlighted the importance of having fun together and the energy and relief they have gained from this. Members felt that Aderonke is skilled at recognising this need and finding ways to build in moments of joyfulness.

“They have supported me mentally and emotionally, they empower us, we laugh together and share experiences of our lives and feel joy, even though we are in the asylum system.”
(Member)

Tough love

ARF and MiSol write letters of support for their Members to use as evidence when they go to court. ARF, particularly, has a strict policy to only write letters for people who have been part of the organisation for six months or more and have attended the vast majority of their local meetings. This is to ensure that it can get to know someone sufficiently well to properly vouch for them. On a few occasions, new Members have tried to get around this policy, however Aderonke continues to stick to it in order to protect the integrity of the organisation and its reputation for honesty. So far, this has paid off. No-one who has been given a letter of support from ARF has had their case rejected by the Home Office and the Courts.

Leading with lived experience

Aderonke has used her own lived experience to support others going through similar situations. Members have highlighted the generous and open way in which she has shared her own struggle and learning, and this seems to be a critical factor in explaining the respect

they have for her as a leader. However, being a founder-leader with her own powerful lived experience comes with some challenges too. Members have sometimes tried to go direct to her to resolve an issue, rather than going first to their branch Coordinator for advice. From time to time, Members from the same country of origin as Aderonke have also tried to draw on this connection to secure preferential treatment. Aderonke has tried to act swiftly to address both challenges. She has emphasised that empowered branch Coordinators are key to the future sustainability of MiSol/ARF, and that the culture of both organisations is rooted in shared values and common experiences, rather than ties born of any particular background.

“When Aderonke started things, she was still struggling with her own case, she was being very humble. She was listening to us, I have been very, very touched with the love I’ve seen from Aderonke. She welcomes everyone. (Member)

“Aderonke always puts any issues on the table, and we can bring others and hear what happens to come out from the situation. She is always happy to hear from us. She never shuts you up. She is a very open person...There are always opportunities to express yourself. She says: ‘if you have something and you don’t share it, then others will not be aware’.” (Member)

Impact & learning in 2020

Overview of the response to Covid-19

As has been the case for many organisations in the migration and integration sector, and in the wider community and voluntary sector, 2020 has been a tough year for MiSol/ARF, dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Very sadly, MiSol lost a valued Member to the virus early on. The Founder and Coordinators were acutely aware of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people from Black and minority ethnic communities. They were also concerned that the lock down would exacerbate existing vulnerabilities for people seeking asylum and for refugees. Finding a way to continue to support people through lockdown, and in the complicated period that has followed, has been a major focus for both organisations.

When lockdown happened, monthly meetings for Members of both organisations quickly shifted online. MiSol and ARF also began to offer a whole range of other online activities, such as yoga, cooking, and Friday evening film nights. The usual frequency of social activities was increased to help reduce isolation and support people's mental health. With homophobic abuse against LGBTIQ people in Home Office accommodation and shared housing a common problem, providing access to supportive online activities was especially important for people from these groups as they could no longer escape their immediate environment.

One of the difficult things about moving activity online was that monthly meetings previously allowed Members to have a hot meal together; for some Members, this was the only proper meal they enjoyed in a month. Attending monthly meetings in person (and being able to drop into the office on other days) also gave Members the opportunity to pick up essential goods from the office supply. With this no longer an option, MiSol and ARF had to think about other ways to support Members at home, particularly those who had underlying health problems or for other reasons were especially vulnerable.

Members of both organisations were sent a short survey asking them about the challenges they were facing and the support they would find most helpful to get them through the difficult lockdown period. With support from PHF's Covid-19 Emergency Fund, Oglesby Charitable Trust and small amounts of funding from other sources, MiSol and ARF were able to provide additional support to around 70 of their most vulnerable Members. Each person was given a subsistence grant of £30 a week for food and other essential goods. In some cases, this was provided in the form of money or vouchers, in other cases volunteers bought the shopping and dropped this off at the person's door. Members were also offered £10 a month for phone data, to make sure that everyone was able to participate in online meetings and activities. In order to keep people safe at home and make lock down life more bearable, MiSol and ARF also made some one-off purchases for Members. For example, they bought smart phones for a few people who had no other way of accessing support and a bicycle for the child of one Member. Where vulnerable Members had essential health and

other appointments they needed to attend, they were given lifts by MiSol and ARF volunteers so they could avoid the risks of travelling by public transport. This emergency support extended over the period from the beginning to April to end of August.

Additional financial support from funders also allowed MiSol and ARF to offer Coordinators a small weekly payment (of £25) for the first time. The responsibilities of Coordinators expanded greatly during the crisis, as they took on new roles managing food parcels and coordinating other volunteers. It was important to acknowledge the crucial role they have played.

In addition to asking about support needs, the survey mailed out immediately after lockdown asked people if they had skills or experience that they could use to support other Members or the organisations as a whole. Aderonke was able to use responses to this survey to identify Members who had a range of useful skills. She identified several Members who have strong writing skills and encouraged them to write blogs and articles for the MiSol/ARF web pages. One of these Members has now taken on a new role to help coordinate MiSol/ARF's social media presence. Aderonke discovered that another Member had strong skills in fundraising and partner engagement. When Aderonke was unable to attend an important meeting with funders over the Summer, she suggested this person attend in her place. She coached them through the process, providing feedback on the presentation they had drafted. The meeting was a success and MiSol/ARF are now working up a proposal for a new initiative on the back of this.

Member feedback on support during the pandemic

Members consulted for this report agreed that the pandemic has been a *"huge blow"*. Life has been very difficult, even for those Members with a support network outside of MiSol/ARF; for the majority of Members without this it has been especially challenging.

"Covid has been very hard. Not being able to go out. It's been a big challenge to be locked up all day in asylum accommodation. People are desperate to go out". (Coordinator)

"Covid has been hell, terrible! I was very worried. I was scared to go to the shops. It was very stressful. It made my depression increase. I felt panicky". (Coordinator)

Several Members highlighted difficulties they have experienced in accessing support from other organisations during this time, even relatively well-resourced organisations that they expected to be able to turn to.

"It was so depressing, you can't go anywhere, everything is closed, you try to email people and there's no reply...it was really survival of the fittest..." (Coordinator)

"It has been difficult and frustrating with Covid 19. People continue to need support and to find a solicitor, and they can't do this, it's very frustrating. Some firms and organisations have stopped working over the pandemic, and some people have been furloughed". (Coordinator)

“During the lockdown, no one you would expect to help, the other charities you think they can help you, but they’re not the ones that helped like African Rainbow did.” (Member)

Members were hugely positive about the on-going support they have received from MiSol and ARF over the Spring and Summer. While they have felt acutely the loss of face-to-face contact at monthly meetings, Members stressed that online activities have played a crucial role in reducing isolation and helping them to manage their stress and anxiety. Financial support has also been invaluable for people who can’t work and are surviving on inadequate levels of Home Office support or have no recourse to public funds at all. With so much of life now online, including MiSol and ARF activities, the provision of phone credit (and in some cases phones too) has been critically important.

“When we got lockdown, I was expecting to be traumatised. I have no cash, I thought it would be the end of the world, how would I survive? So, I was surprised to get the financial support. It was beyond my imagination. I couldn’t believe this. When God closes the door, another door opens! Thank you. The phone is everything for me, the internet is everything for me.” (Member)

“Before, when we used to have face to face meetings, it was very warm and welcoming. Then when lockdown happened, it went on Zoom. We had mental health sessions...and we got some financial support. This really helped as I don’t have wifi at home so I know I can access the internet and make calls. I’ve not felt as I would have done with the lockdown. I would have been driven out of my mind, without the support. The financial support was a big surprise. I can just say it has exceeded my expectations, far above.” (Member)

“Migrants are often forgotten about, and this is doubly so at this time, when we have really suffered. MiSol have given us emotional support and family when we can’t meet physically, they have made it possible to still meet...It has been a godsend. When I think of MiSol, even though we are surviving in this harsh environment, I feel I am among brothers and sisters”. (Member)

Coordinators have expressed a real sense of pride and achievement about the way that MiSol/ARF have managed to shift activities online so quickly and effectively. Some Members have required quite a lot of additional help to access activities online, but Coordinators are pleased about what they have been able to do to support people at this difficult time.

“It’s been a big challenge, helping people to use the internet. I’ve used Zoom before, so it was easier for me. I’d be in a meeting and at the same time helping lots of other people to get online via WhatsApp, or whatever, taking them through it step by step.” (Coordinator)

Members gave particularly positive feedback about the mental health sessions, which have been hosted on Zoom each month, and bring together people from both MiSol and ARF.

“Mental stress is a huge issue. This has been a big time out of society, it’s stopped people from being connected, it’s been a big blow... This has been very helpful.” (Coordinator)

“It’s very helpful. You see lots of people smiling. We do laughing therapy. They ask you to laugh, turn your neck on the other side and laugh. Or reach out and collect the happiness and bring it back to you. And then hold your stomach and laugh. It’s very nice. You feel different at the end. Or hold your ear and laugh. You get to the end and you just feel everything disappearing.” (Coordinator)

“I joined African Rainbow because I felt they understood my struggles and what I was going through, as a victim of torture... There was such a long waiting list to get help from the NHS. If it had not been for the mental health sessions here, I’m not sure...African Rainbow helped me so much with my anxiety and PTSD to the point where I can stand and talk to people here. So, I’m really grateful to Aderonke. The sessions really do help a lot in ways you can’t imagine.” (Member)

Members pointed out that, despite the difficulties experienced this year, MiSol and ARF have managed to maintain moments of joy and light-heartedness, even where people can’t meet face to face.

“At the end of each year, we have a party with everyone together. All the branches get together, we arrange transport for Members to come to Manchester. All the branches also get together to go to Pride. This has been a big thing missing from the calendar this year. Lots of Members will miss this. But we can still have a drink and a dance online!” (Coordinator)

MiSol/ARF's reach & impact: highlights from this year

Around 70 of MiSol/ARF's most vulnerable Members have received additional support through the pandemic

"I have continued to get great support, any time of the day or night. During lockdown, it has been very hard with my mental health, and financially. I want to say thank you so much for your support, emotionally, practically and mentally". (Member)

"I never thought we could have done this! It's great that we have been able to manage. So many people couldn't even use a smartphone and now they have a phone and they're using Zoom. It's quite impressive!" (Coordinator)

The organisations have learned how to host their activities online & what works best in this new context

Emergency funding has meant volunteer coordinators could be paid a small amount every week, for the first time

"In my own case, I was not getting any support from the Home Office, and I was staying with a friend...My friend lost their job so the money we got from African Rainbow helped to pay the rent. To have some money coming in really helped a lot." (Coordinator)

"Record numbers of Members have been granted refugee status, even during the pandemic!"

Twenty Members of ARF and five Members of MiSol have been granted refugee status since March.

The future: where next?

A mixed model of support

MiSol and ARF's plans to support its Members over the Winter are rapidly evolving, as the situation with respect to Covid-19 develops.

The organisations have completed a risk assessment, with external assistance. It is likely that support will remain online for now. Over time, it may be that a mixed model of support emerges. While online activities have been very effective over the Summer, the Founder and Coordinators are aware that a wholly online offer doesn't provide the same degree of comfort and connection for people experiencing considerable challenges and isolation in their lives. That said, continuing to offer some activities online may have some advantages. It would enable those Members who would struggle to attend meetings in person (because of childcare or other responsibilities) to continue to take part. It would also reduce overall expenditure on travel vouchers.

There are likely to be some specific challenges for ARF of a largely online offer. One of the organisation's key activities is writing letters of support for Members in their asylum cases. There is a concern that it will be much more difficult to get to know new Members in an online setting that lacks the relaxed informality of in-person meet ups. This is an issue that requires further thought over the coming months.

Strengthening partnerships

Coordinators and other Members who took part in this learning exercise highlighted the particular difficulties of finding a solicitor in the past few months, when some firms had furloughed staff and stopped taking on new clients. Coordinators also highlighted uneven availability of free legal advice in different parts of the country. It was felt to be easier to find legal free advice in Manchester, for example, than in Birmingham. Coordinators were keen for MiSol/ARF to continue to build partnerships with legal advice providers around the country, especially those that were "LGBT friendly".

Several Coordinators also emphasised the number of Members who are experiencing homelessness. They suggested more should be done, if possible, to try to support people in this situation, including by extending the organisation's networks and partnerships in this area.

A focus on learning and skills

Members were keen to see MiSol/ARF doing more in future to support people to learn and develop new skills. This was seen as crucial in helping Members to make the most of future work opportunities, and also to stay motivated and positive.

"It's hard with Covid to think about doing things differently in the future, but I would like to...make sure all Members have the chance to do something new and learn new skills. I

think it's important that we can give Members more opportunity for work experience so they can find jobs when they get their status". (Coordinator)

"I think if there is capacity...it would be good to get some funding to support Members with more training, in any capacity that Members want, to improve their skills and prepare them for the outside world. As we wait for our papers, we need to think about developing skills for employment and how we can do this...Skills are very important." (Member)

"Free online courses, if we can't work this is very important. I have found some good ones, but they are not free. It keeps mind and body going, and brain. It helps with depression." (Member)

The struggle for economic independence in a pandemic

Over the Summer, Aderonke discovered that one Member of ARF/MiSol had been using their emergency subsistence payment to save up for a training course. Although the Member had not yet been granted asylum, they had managed to secure a work permit because they had previously worked in a profession included on the UK's shortage occupation list. However, they needed the correct certification to get a job in their chosen field. Aderonke was concerned that the Member should be using the emergency funding for food and other essential goods. However, the Member was determined to save £10 from their weekly £30 grant so they could pay for the course and become economically independent as soon as possible.

A wider range of activities

Members were keen for MiSol/ARF to continue to expand the range of other activities they offer. There was particular support for more activities to promote good mental health and wellbeing. English language support, creative, and outdoor activities were also mentioned.

"I would like to put on more drama activities if it's safe...I would also like to organise an art group, I think it would help with stress and anxiety, for when the pandemic is over...I think we should also expand the mental health work. It would also be good to do more language sessions so people can improve their English. This would help with progression to college and work". (Coordinator)

"Maybe some outdoor activities, ball games, in future, when we are able to do this." (Member)

Ensuring access to the internet

Members emphasised that for MiSol/ARF to support people over the Winter, it was essential that everyone has access to appropriate equipment and data. Members pointed out some people continue to miss out because they can't easily get online.

“I am so, so happy to talk to people and that we help each other. But there are some people we are not seeing, as they have no smartphone or laptop, so they are missing. Sometimes you see them disappearing in meetings, as the phone is dying.” (Member)

“We might need a laptop at home to do work or training. To have funding for a tablet or laptop to do this from home...now I’m doing everything on the phone. I’m always on the phone, but it’s very small...” (Member)

Strengthening organisational infrastructure

Finally, Members highlighted the need for more paid and fulltime roles at MiSol/ARF, to ensure both organisations have the capacity to respond to Members’ needs.

Until recently, both MiSol and ARF were run on an entirely voluntary basis. While the organisations had been successful in attracting numerous small grants, this was not sufficient to fund paid staff posts. Just before the pandemic struck, in February 2020, MiSol appointed its first part-time coordinator, with support from the UK fund of Ben and Jerry’s Foundation. A three-year grant, from PHF and Oglesby Charitable Trust meant it was possible to extend this post to full-time, working across both organisations.

While the person appointed to this post has now moved on, the Founder is keen to recruit again. In future, the role may be split into two, focusing on each organisation or on different functions that span both. The Founder has recently created a Media Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator post, to help increase the profile and influencing capacity of both organisations. As highlighted earlier, each of the branches of ARF now have Assistant Coordinators, to support the lead Coordinators, and this role will be important in boosting capacity and leadership at branch level.

These developments will help to create a stronger senior team around the Founder. Alongside her work at MiSol and ARF, Aderonke has been training to become a barrister, inspired by her own tough experience of the UK legal system. She is keen to begin a career in immigration and human rights law from 2022. Having a stronger senior team of paid staff and voluntary Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators will, over time, allow her to focus on her role as Chair and step back a little from day-to-day operations.

Note on evaluation & learning

Current approach & future plans

This one-off learning exercise has drawn on interviews and discussions with the MiSol/ARF Founder, Coordinators and other Members.

The table below sets out how MiSol/ARF are currently evaluating and learning from their work (outside of this learning process) and how this might be done in future.

Information we collect about	Current approaches	Possible future approaches (additional activities)
Who our Members are	Application form (ARF)	
The challenges our Members face & the support they want/need from us	One-off consultations (e.g. Member needs during C-19) Conversations at monthly meetings One to one chats between Members & branch coordinators	Annual Member survey
The reach of our support & activities	Central organisational & branch records	Annual Member survey
Members' views of the support we offer & its impact on them	Everyday feedback (via text, email, phone etc) Videos made & sent in by Members	More systematic collection of everyday feedback Annual Member survey Small number of Member case studies
Partners' views of the work we do & their experiences of working with us		Partner interviews/discussions
The impact of our wider influencing & campaigning work		Campaign case studies