



Migrant Action is an organisation in change. Each month, over a year, Fidelis Chebe and Mike Winter from Migrant Action met with Oasis Foundation trustee Rick Trask and I at the Oasis Centre to embark upon the careful and radical process, which we ended up calling 'strategic thinking', to discuss and guide the changes the organisation is going through, and to think about guiding these changes into the future.

Towards the conclusion of this process, on a warm Spring morning, I sat down (digitally) with Fidelis and Mike from Migrant Action for an extended interview, reflecting on the process, why it was important to them, and where they are now. In my capacity as the Narrator of Social Change for the Oasis Foundation, I'd like to share this insightful conversation, and talk about the strategic thinking process itself: what happened, how it was to be part of, and what wider insights can be shared from the process. The quotes throughout are taken from my conversation with Fidelis, the Director and Founder, and the Chair, Mike.

“Hopefully, this conversation, as you said, would serve multiple purposes including and not least putting Migrant Action in the space where people will understand why we do what we do and how we do what we do - and the relationships that we forged with organisations including Oasis.”

So who are Migrant Action?

How did the collaboration with the Oasis Foundation begin?

“We recognise that our organisation is on a journey.”

Migrant Action is a grassroots Leeds-based rights-and-justice organisation, founded in 2016 by Fidelis Chebe with the aim of supporting and advocating for migrants to the UK (including non-asylum seeking migrants), while also addressing the structural vulnerabilities which create a need for organisations like Migrant Action in the first place. From my very first conversations with Fidelis, this was clear - he is a man passionate not only about providing direct assistance to the people who come to Migrant Action seeking help and advice, but also about working to challenge and transform the wider system, the 'hostile environment', to make long-term deep change.

A phrase one often hears from him – “access to justice” – shows clearly how Migrant Action positions itself. This phrase states a view of the world, – for so many migrants, injustice is widespread, and justice is inaccessible. Migrant Action then, aims to be a grassroots mediator, addressing what hasn't been present - a smile, advice, understanding, advocacy – and hoping

to guide the way towards a more just treatment of migrants in society. This is the journey that Migrant Action is on - expanding and evolving to better position itself in that landscape.

“When I started Migrant Action I was acutely aware that the issues that we’re responding to are symptomatic of a systemic and structural problem. We knew that we had to begin with responding to those issues in order to get the data set to be able to allow us to say: ‘Ok. There is a wider problem that we need to look at.’

The 'baby Migrant Action' was doing exactly those interventions and responding to those needs, but as we then began to grow and realise ‘OK: we’re going to be here for a while. Now that we are established in that space and we’re responding to these needs - and organisations are getting interested in our work - we have to mature to a level where we’re engaging with a conversation around system change.’

The Oasis Foundation met Migrant Action at this crucial period of internal growth, at the end of 2021. The organisation, already grown just from Fidelis’s initiative, now employed one more, and was continuing to grow at speed. At this point too, the organisation was beginning the process of becoming independent from its ‘house’ charity - Leeds Christian Community Trust (LCCT) - and was hoping to extend its purpose to formally include systems convening, bringing many organisations together to effect change, alongside working directly to support migrants.

“LCCT functions as an umbrella organisation, allowing people like Fidelis, community leaders with a good idea to do something, to do it without having to develop a legal structure for themselves. It’s a good way of getting something off the ground.”

These factors together, this important moment of independence and self-definition, created a moment that raised many fundamental questions about the organisation and its future: *how can we grow intentionally, sustainably, and really make our thinking about this concrete? In what direction do we actually want to grow, and why? Who are we, and who do we want to become?’*

These questions, then, at this crucial juncture in the organisation’s growth, formed the seed for the coming strategic thinking process, which was to structure and ground this questioning.

Strategic Thinking Process: Why?

“It’s been an enforced stopping and thinking time. I doubt we would have otherwise diaried in two and a half hours a month to say, ‘Let’s stop and think about what Migrant Action looks like and where we’re going.’”

For Fidelis, already part of the Oasis leadership development programme, it made sense to “*think alongside*” someone from Oasis - Rick Trask in this case, a facilitator and mentor experienced with systems, uncertainty, and change. For the Oasis Foundation too, it made sense to support a local social change organisation in ‘developing individual and community resilience’ - one of the Foundation’s main principles - and so to enable this collaborative project

to develop a sustainable strategic thinking framework which can embed itself within the actions of the organisation.

So what was the strategic thinking process? Perhaps it becomes clearer if we ask ‘why the strategic thinking process?’ In Mike Winter’s words: **“a lot of organisations have kind of got an idea of what they’re doing, but they often just kind of muddle along.”** It can be tempting, as an organisation in change, to thrust headlong into it, gather funding as you go, and use it to grow as quickly as possible, without thinking too hard - especially if, as Fidelis said too: **“funders don’t resource thinking time”.**

It seemed that, for Fidelis and Mike at an important point of organisational growth, it meant a lot to have **“just two and a half hours a month - for to go somewhere in the quiet confines of Oasis and have a rich conversation that challenges you”.** As a member of a small grassroots organisation dealing directly with individuals in need, Fidelis described how it can be particularly hard to let oneself ‘be’ rather than just act:

“You are so caught up in challenging the hostility and responding to the consequences of hostility that you don’t have the time and the space to think. You’re seeing the effects on migrants and all you think at that point is - ‘how do I meet this urgent need?’ – it’s coming thick and fast. So for many organisations in the refugee and migrant sector – there is a poverty of time to think - you don’t have the luxury to breathe.”

And it became clear too for Fidelis that the issue of thinking time was one integral to the whole organisation’s mission going into the future, with the power to shift both personal and organisational mindsets:

“The more you don’t have time to think, the more you and the organisation itself becomes reactive rather than proactive. And therefore to be able to engage and actually discern the sort of structural-systemic underpinnings of what we are responding to - we need that time and space to think. We need to encourage and sustain these kinds of spaces, where you can critically analyse what in the wider ecosystem is actually creating what we’re constantly reacting to and responding to.”

But the strategic thinking process was more than just a chance to breathe. The most significant consequence of having space for deeper reflection is the ability to more clearly glimpse the possible long-term futures of the organisation, as well as the ability to actually look at the organisation and its operations ‘from above’. Growing only within the bubble of the day-to-day, the future can remain distant beyond the immediate, and the present obscure behind the familiar and reactive. These concerns formed the content of many discussions and investigations throughout the strategic thinking process.

The Future, and Uncertainty

“Rick sat us down - it would probably be about June or July last year - and said ‘Okay.

These are your ideas of where you're going, but what about 10 years from now? What about 20 years from now?' [laughs] ... Well, you know, we hadn't done that had we? We might have had a 'Well let's see what we might be doing in a year or two' conversation. I think it really did make us stop and think and sort of say 'a-ha, that's an idea.'"

When I joined the strategic thinking process – as a thinking partner and to assist with the development of the framework document – I was also shocked, challenged, and inspired by Rick's questions. The present, the 'next thing', often feels so demanding and immediate, and the future so elusive and unpredictable; it can be comforting to remain in a more blinkered reactive mode, when we're living during a time of constant change, through political, economic, ecological turmoil.

But the certainty of uncertainty is also precisely why a constantly changing environment needs to be taken into account. For Rick and Migrant Action, strategic thinking prepares an individual or an organisation for the future much more effectively than a strategic *plan*, which often quickly goes out of date. Rick was asking for Migrant Action to seriously consider the consequences of thinking long-term, with all its uncertainty and constant change – *what are the opportunities and risks that might present themselves, how could the landscape change, and what strategies and qualities does the organisation need to remain adaptive to constant change and uncertainty?*

As Mike expressed: *"You have a big picture of things that you want to change – and particularly around the systemic change it's very hard to strategise that far into the future – but that doesn't stop you from having a wish list at least, of the things that you really would like to see embedded and the kind of difference that you'd like to be making. To have an organisation that's got the flexibility, and the reflectivity to be able to grow into that – that's the key."*

You might think that it'd feel overwhelming to look so far into the future, without 'answers', or a sense of certainty - but the more distanced point-of-view was something that seemed to invigorate the group and strengthen their vision, building up a clearer and broader understanding of the organisation and where it could go, aiming to ground the 'next steps' of Migrant Action in a theory of the long-term, of what may be. Being asked as well - *why do you want this, why are you becoming a systems convenor, why are you personally engaged* - additionally reinforced a sense of individual and organisational legitimacy and purpose that seemed to feel clarified and articulated.

Each month, the conversations built up a way of thinking that felt new and uniquely deep to me, providing a much-needed sense of future possibility. What I experienced was that, even when the future holds no 'answers', just accompanying good questions bravely into the unknown can transform your way of thinking and offer a sense of strength.

"[Rick] just asks that gentle but really quite sharp question - that just makes you go: "Oh, I haven't thought like that." It's like being coached rather than mentored isn't it? You know a good coach asks you questions - doesn't give you answers but just allows you to

develop your own thinking. I really feel like that this past year when we've done these sessions. - each time I kind of come away feeling really hopeful"

What Came out of these Sessions?

Throughout the process of these meetings, the group developed a 'strategic thinking framework' document, which aims to sustain and structure the thinking from the sessions, and to hold an evolving collection of what is necessary and fundamental for all of the organisation's growth and action. The hope is that the framework can function almost as a kind of bespoke 'compass', to facilitate a guide-rails process unique for Migrant Action's journey, involving ongoing cycles of reflection and action in order to keep hold of the essential questions, to adapt to shifting currents with agility and creativity.

But to begin developing the framework, it was helpful to look at the fundamentals of the organisation from an outside perspective: *'what are we actually doing, and why? What is the context that we operate within?'*

"I think it's been really healthy to have a kind of monthly reflection, thinking – 'let's just have a look - what's even the basics?' ... When we first started, Rick just said 'What happens when somebody walks through the door?' ... I mean you kind of know what you do, but actually to see it written down on paper and to see it from the perspective of the people you're helping, and think about what happens to them, what's it like when they walk in. That's a different thing, getting right back to that beginning and asking 'Okay, so what matters at that moment?'"

So as well as visualising their actual organisational process, Migrant Action also mapped out their current stakeholder landscape – their location in an interconnected network of potential collaborators and funders, alongside the communities and individuals which the organisation supports – a particularly fundamental practice to systems convening work. Furthermore, they worked to clarify and articulate their vision, core values, approach, and guiding principles for the next five-to-ten years: *if there will be organisational growth, what do we want it to align with?*

The document also extended to looking in careful detail at potential future changes to the internal and external environment and how those could be risks or opportunities, as well as documenting ideas for resilience and renewal through coming change. Especially since Migrant Action is a small organisation that relies upon key relationships and individuals - such as Fidelis himself, the Director - to remain flexible and sustainable, it was important to ask difficult questions. *What happens if someone cannot work, or is on parental leave, or if a key contact retires? How can we ensure resilience in our staff, volunteers, and in our broader system – and move towards stronger interdependence?*

"It's a bit like a governor, or a critical friend, almost saying 'Okay. Let's see which things might be a problem: how do we tackle that?' So I think it's not just about having a

strategic document for working on but crucially it's about building resilience. It was very helpful to actually sit down and actually make notes of a kind-of 'if-then-else' routine"

This document then, hoped to crystallise and model the deep strategic thinking that could map the current landscape and guide Migrant Action resiliently into the future, open to the certainty of uncertainty. The framework concluded with five key organisational priorities for the next years, more concrete ideas backed up by their approach to planning around these priorities in an ongoing reflective way; a framework for strategic *thinking* that can ground any future strategic *plans*.

Where next?

"I think we've kind of come out with a set of documents that are a bit like the pirate code. They're more like guidelines, but it's a document that we will look at regularly and then ask important questions around, evolving as the organisation evolves. But at the same time rooted in some fundamental foundational principles of Migrant Action and who Migrant Action is. We want our organisation to be rooted in 'Love of Other' in all that we do - and I think that you've got a document that reflects that."

It was important for them that the strategic thinking framework document be not merely 'a document' like many others, destined for the shelf and flashed to funders (although of course funders will be interested). For them, the strategic thinking process and framework importantly felt owned by them and formed around their unique needs, a tool for reflection that is translatable into sustainable growth and action – and that can build the path towards their vision of a well-run systems-convening rights-and-justice organisation effectively impacting structural change.

Fidelis spoke evocatively about how he sees the significance of the framework:

"One of the things that we're very intentional about in this process is that it has to translate into the lives of people and the life of the organisation. We wanted to challenge the orthodoxy of a 'one-size-fits-all' strategic plan document.

...instead, our approach was very 'culture change', where people are at the heart of it. It recognises that we are in a world post-Covid where we have to constantly navigate uncertainty - but with hope. And to have the confidence to look into the future as long and hard as possible – with ongoing points to reflect and review.

...We have developed frames of reference, with which we can challenge ourselves and say 'How are we doing at the moment, and what do we need to do? How do we adapt? How do we flex?' It becomes an organisational culture of continuous reflexivity, from which we can build resilience, and stay current. If we do this, we are in a much better

place than just having a text of prescribed values and things that we need to do – and somebody is there with the responsibility to 'do it' and then report somewhere.”

The group is keen to incorporate the document into board meetings - with an aspect in each meeting about strategy – *“looking at the priorities, and how we keep on going with the values and principles that we’ve articulated, seeking to honour the work that we’ve done.”*. And they are also enthusiastic about embedding their strategic thinking approach within the governance documents of the newly independent organisation, making sure to enable *“governance that has funding resilience, that understands that issues we’re dealing with, that has leadership with diverse lived experience, and that conducts risk management in a transformational way, which is not excluding but radically inclusive.”*

The hope is also that the success of the strategic thinking work can effect change in funding culture more widely and address the sector’s structural justice issues - *“to grow power within the grassroots, to change the system”*. As Fidelis expressed: traditional funders might imagine that small, newer, grassroots organisations - especially black-and-brown lead ones - don’t have the strategy and financial management to ‘get the job done’. And as a result, these kinds of organisations find it hard to grow and be taken seriously, and to receive funding for more than the immediate tasks ahead. Instead, the goal is for funders to listen to grassroots organisations and ask: *“How can we actually resource strategic thinking and get involved in supporting that? How can we resource organisational development? How do we resource strategic change within organisations and build infrastructure and resilience so that these organisations can grow and thrive?”*

I think that this transformational approach shows the unique way that Migrant Action thinks about strategic thinking: not just as a tool for their own organisation’s growth, but also as a way to help nourish and spread resources throughout the wider grassroots ecosystem. In this way, a collaborative and interdependent network is formed and strengthened, which can more powerfully act together. During the sessions, Rick asked, “So: *why are you systems convening?*”; for Fidelis this *question “...was transformational, because it made me think, ‘Ok, I’m convening because we really want to talk about structural justice and transformation, and at the moment the power-shift is not happening from top to bottom. It has to be power from the grassroots that changes the system; you need then to bring together small organisations that are invisible or individuals with lived experience of power systems, and build convening around that – to link them up with all the organisations that can impact change.”* It is power *together* that makes the difference, lifting one-another up and helping each other to develop resilience - together - throughout uncertain times.

Migrant Action will continue to work with the Oasis Foundation, bringing the strategic thinking framework to continue to evolve with the board at focussed away-days. The aim then is to embed strategic thinking in an ongoing way - so that it becomes part of the culture of the organisation and how it relates to funders, clients, and collaborators. *“We hope that it even almost gets to the point where we are unconsciously living that strategy, as part and*

parcel of the way we activate our sense of social justice. All parts of our work should be a daily activism.”

Thank you to Migrant Action and the Oasis Foundation for the opportunity to be part of the strategic thinking process, and to Fidelis and Mike for the interview.