

CELEBRATING 17 YEARS OF REFUGEE SOCIAL SERVICES



Celebration of the 17th Anniversary of the RSS, July 2025

On 24 July 2025, Refugee Social Services (a not-for-profit organisation serving asylum seekers and refugees in Durban, South Africa) celebrated their 17th anniversary of existence. On this occasion we spoke to the RSS Director, Yasmin Rajah and some of the social workers to discuss the origins and activities of the organisation.

Yasmin, can you tell us about when you first arrived at RSS?

I arrived in 2003 even before RSS existed. It was originally a very small project of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) working with UNHCR. I started as a social worker, and there were three other people working with me, in a small office filled with boxes. It was really busy, I was doing 14 to 15 consultations a day, and no one really understood the specific issues that forced migrants were facing. Five years later in 2008, RSS was born and officially documented as a not-for-profit South-African organisation.

What have been the most memorable activities and occasions over the 17 years of RSS?

We've done such nice things. We started our peer educator programme to get out into the communities and really work with them; We were helping to build support networks that people lose when they leave their communities – providing information and doing counselling in people's own languages with interpreters and peer educators who we have trained and whose capacities we've strengthened.

We've had programmes with youth, women, old people, people with disabilities. We've done a lot of work around getting access to services for the community. We've built awareness around refugees, who they are, why they are here.

I think one of the most important achievements is that we've managed to create safe spaces and create trust. The refugee community trusts this organisation because they know we work in their best interest.



Training on using sign language for RSS staff, 2014

Another angle of our work is contributing to advocacy and policy development in support of people's rights. And we've taken the message to the community when policies change. For example, when the White Paper came out, we brought people together so that they could hear and understand how government policies would impact them. And they could contribute to our responses to the government on this.

And then there have been lots of nice celebrations. For example, celebrating World Refugee Day or National Heritage Day. We use these celebrations to make links between the migrants and local South African communities, and to have fun together.

What has changed in these 17 years ?

It has become increasingly difficult to navigate the system and to integrate into South Africa because the asylum system has become increasingly broken. Trying to get documents is so challenging! For example, sometimes people get an asylum seeker permit, and then their claim is rejected, and they end up waiting for an appeal for years and years. I would say that less than 1% of our clients actually get refugee status, even when they come from known refugee

producing countries (eg Democratic Republic of Congo). There is very progressive legislation, but the system has broken down.

And if you don't have a document (or a robust document) then you face enormous challenges. Documents are a person's gateway to services and rights.

And also, xenophobia has become mainstream. There are now organised groups that are "othering" foreign nationals. The anti-migrant narrative has really taken off. If you switch on the TV or radio, you hear these narratives every day.

What are your main challenges now?

The main challenge now is a lack of funding. We've always had challenges but the amount of cuts post-covid are huge.

One of our biggest donors is now only funding 10% of our overall programme.

And this year the funding we had managed to access from the US was all pulled suddenly from under our feet. We had a huge programme where we were concentrating on the most vulnerable and a lot of our funding was going into direct aid for these vulnerable families.

The pulling of that funding was a huge hit for us and for people in the community. Telling a 92-year-old that we are no longer able to give you the small amount we are giving you That's not an easy thing to do.

It takes a lot of work to try and get more funding and the competition for the money is huge. South Africa is seen as a middle-income country so we don't get much funding, even if it is really needed.

What do you enjoy most about working here?

Every day is different. There is space to do new things and to innovate. And I love the staff and the clients: we've got histories together and we've done some nice things...

And the opportunities you get to connect with so many interesting people who we work with.

What are your hopes for the future?

I hope that we'll be open for another 17 years. But also, that we might need to close down the organisation, not because of lack of funding, but because there are no more refugees who need us. But as long as there are refugees I hope we can open our doors to them.

RSS currently has ten staff members, we talked to four of the social workers who shared their experiences. Many of them came as interns and knew little about refugees when they started. As Thandaza says; "I learned all about refugees here – about which countries they were coming from"

Working with refugees also changes their perspectives, as Nombuso explains:

'As a child raised in Umlazi, I was raised to be suspicious about foreigners – but now I understand their situation'.

The exception is Shadia who was herself a child refugee. She was a client of RSS before getting her social work degree and being offered a job in the organisation. As she explains:

'It's important for me to know how it feels to be in someone's shoes, so that you can tell someone that this will pass. It's about who you want to become and what you want to be in life. You don't feel sorry for yourself, you need to stand up and fight until you get it. It makes me feel happy to be here – to give a good example. Life is not about how you start – it's about how you end – so keep fighting and keep trying and don't give up. It's nice to be here – you are not wasting time – you're changing someone's life !'

The social workers told us how difficult the work could be sometimes:

'People are being squeezed – it's too much – financial problems, discrimination, security. We are overwhelmed – how can we help? It's suffocating sometimes' as Mpume explains.

But the group work with refugees was rewarding:

'People are able to see that they are not the only one facing a situation. They are able to share their experience with each other, and everyone is listening. It's great to see them sharing and trusting one and another in the group. They can say they are meeting new friends and new family.' (Shadia)

And they also enjoyed the opportunities to celebrate:

'I loved it on Heritage Day we were wearing traditional clothes. Each group had to cook a certain cultural food. I think since then I realised how people are different and how they enjoy themselves with food, music and being together. Everyone was looking beautiful in their different attires – we had lots of different food – there were young people, old mamas, it was beautiful. It's good that we also celebrate despite the things we are going through!' (Nombuso)



Celebrating Heritage Day, 2024

In the 17 years of RSS' existence, they have assisted numerous people. In a climate of increasing xenophobia and restricted access to rights, their services are more needed than ever.

Listen to the podcast of this interview on SoundCloud:

[*The GRABS Podcast – Episode 6: Refugee Social Services Anniversary*](#)