**TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT**

**‘WE CANNOT WALK ALONE’**

**Persons Present**

Furaha (F)

Loraine (L)

Michelle (M)

Runako (R)

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F: Hello everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today. My name is Furaha Asani and I am the research lead at Watershed. As part of my job I am also on the editorial board of Container Magazine, who is hosting this event today. This is a panel co-produced by four individuals, myself included, all with lived experience of the UK’s hostile environment. Because this panel was hosted on the first day of Refugee Week 2021, we decided to name it after the theme for Refugee Week, which was ‘We Cannot Walk Alone’. This theme was inspired by Dr Martin Luther King Jr’s ‘I have a dream’ speech, and to us it captures the spirit of community which has held us, encouraged us, supported us, and kept us going. When we think about who gets to tell stories about the migrant experience, what often happens is a lot of researchers, academics and journalists, many who don’t have lived experience of border hostility, get these opportunities to be the storytellers. While we, that’s precarious migrants and those with lived experience of border violence, are glad for coverage that contributes to discussions about our precarity, this coverage often comes at the cost of our own erasure, silencing and invisabilision. We deserve to have our own voices heard. We believe it is high time that people who have positioned themselves as the ‘voice of the voiceless’ pass the microphone and opportunities to those of us with lived experiences so we can speak, share or use any other forms of communication to express ourselves. This is why it was very important to Container Magazine that, rather than pull together an event and invite guests to speak on it, we actually co-created, co-produced and provided support throughout to these wonderful individuals: Michelle, Loraine and Runako, who shared so openly about their experiences with the hostile environment. I’m so grateful to three of them and to the entire editorial board at Container Magazine for their support.

F: Our collective decision was that in order to protect identities, rather than using typical online spaces to host our meeting, we would use one with a capability of hosting avatars. In order to do this, we received support from Wendy Lawn, who invested so much time and care over months – taking our feedback on board to create a space for us as well as guiding us through designing our own avatars. Wendy, we are so grateful to you. I am sure everyone will appreciate the realities of technical issues, which we did end up facing. We have done everything we can to produce a recording that is true to our meeting and gives a glimpse in the virtual world Wendy created. We apologise for any inconvenience our technical issues may cause in the viewing or listening process and we hope that you enjoy this event. We ask that you stand together with us in solidarity as we seek the end of border violence. For more information about borders and imagining what a world without borders could look like please view the talk I recently gave as part of Pervasive Media Studios lunchtime talk series called [‘Borders: Business as Usual and the Third Horizon’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4ZNMc2jNqU).

F: I’d like to once again thank Michelle, Loraine and Runako for co-producing this panel discussion called ‘We Cannot Walk Alone’. And indeed, the four of us as a group have been working together on this project for quite a number of months, and our paths have also crossed in many other spheres, and I believe we all agree that none of us has reached this point on our own. We all have experience with navigating the UK’s hostile environment, and also with being precarious in many ways. We’ve also received a lot of support, for which we are very grateful, and today we just want to take some time to be in community together, to comfort one another, to offer one another some words of encouragement, to tell our stories in our own voices, and to hold space for one another. So with all that being said, I would like to invite these fantastic siblings of mine to introduce themselves too. So I’m going to first of all start by inviting Loraine to introduce herself. Loraine, please share with us as much or as little of yourself as you feel comfortable to, by way of an introduction. Over to you, Loraine.

L: Thank you… thanks. Yeah, I’m Loraine Mponela, originally from Malawi. I came in this country 13 years ago. I have a son, and I’ll be a grandmother next month.

F: Congratulations!

L: Thank you. My background is public health, but in Coventry, where I live now, I’m part of Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group, CARAG in short. So, CARAG is a community organisation, which is run by asylum seekers, refugees, as well as migrants living in the West Midlands. I am an asylum seeker, aand that’s the criteria for joining the group. I’ve also been in the leadership of CARAG since… really since 2016, when I was moved to Coventry. So I started as a secretary and then later on chairperson, so I’m still the current chairperson for CARAG. Thank you.

F: Thank you so much, Loraine. I’m going to invite Michelle to introduce yourself.

M: Hello. My name is Michelle Fuller. I came to the UK at the very end of 2001. I am originally from the Caribbean. My background is in accounting and finance. I previously worked for the NHS for nine years. The last role I had there was in accounting. My situation with the Home Office basically started around 2009, and that eventually led up to me becoming destitute and undocumented by early, I think, 2014. So, between 2009 and 2014, there was a lot going on, there were a lot of applications – so many different things happened – and so, because of my situation with the Home Office, I basically was forced out of my career. So, when I became destitute, I wanted to basically tell stories like mine about people who had experience with the hostile environment, and what they were going through. So I became a volunteer writer with a charity, and I also volunteered with the charity that was housing me at the time. So, basically, the background was in accounting, but because of what I was going through with the Home Office, that extended into writing about the experience, creating creative works around that experience to tell of the experience. So, yeah, that’s just a basic intro. I hope it wasn’t too much.

F: It definitely wasn’t too much, Michelle. We’re so glad to hear from you. And I’m going to give the floor to Runako to introduce yourself to us, as much or as little as you’re comfortable doing.

R: Yes hello. It's Runako here. I'll start from here. I was born in Zimbabwe and I moved to Europe as a teenage boy at the age of 15, firstly to Dublin, Ireland, and then to the United Kingdom. I've actually lived in the United Kingdom for… I'm in my seventeenth year of living here but I've actually spent most of my life in Europe. I am undocumented, and contrary to the popular belief that people like myself come on dinghies or by what the government calls 'unlawful means', I came to the UK on a visa. My story is probably the most common story of people who are undocumented and living in the UK, who moved here for any number of reasons: whether it was to study, to work, to seek safety, or to seek a better life, or a combination of any or all of these things, and end up living here and for some reason they've… we have fallen through the cracks of the immigration system and out of regularised status. And, I mean, me personally, I tend to tell people that I was made undocumented as a result of the government's hostile environment policies. When those came in, that's when myself and many of my fellow undocumented people that I know, we were made undocumented around the same period. I would like to add that I'm also part of a migrant-founded activist group and collective called Regularise. Through our campaigning work and organising, we seek to improve the quality of life of undocumented migrants living in the UK by attaining basic rights and a safer and more equitable path to settlement and citizenship. So yeah, that's sort of my story for now. I won't say too much more. Having lived here for so long it will take too long to describe my story and experience. Thank you.

F: Thank you so much, Runako, and I mean, I hear what you’re saying when you talk about how long you can actually spend talking about your story, because I think about myself, and this is something that I’ve shared on one of the lunchtime talks, so for those who are listening and viewing this, feel free to go and catch up on the lunchtime talk that was around [borders](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4ZNMc2jNqU), and I shared a little bit about my story. I came here for a PhD, and when I was transitioning from a post-doc to a permanent post, I got caught in the hostile environment as well, and I was threatened with deportation. And I guess, you know, when we’re talking about all our situations, and because I know the three of you behind the scenes, what I really admire in your activism is the fact that you always make sure to emphasise this message that those of us who have come in on whatever visa that we’ve come in on, we are not of any more worth than anyone who has arrived in a dinghy, or by any kind of route. It’s very, very important that we, you know, keep pushing this message that no human being is illegal, and that everybody has the right to immigration justice. So, just again to say thank you so much for joining us, thank you so much for being so generous with your stories, and I guess I want to do a little bit of a check-up, because there’s been so much that has been going on. I mean, we’re now in a period where we… we’re asking questions about transitioning out of lockdown, but we have been in a global pandemic, a pandemic where, for a very long time, precarious migrants, undocumented individuals, asylum seekers, refugees, we’ve not known whether or not we have access to Covid-19 vaccines. That’s just one facet of healthcare, and then, you know, the isolation: trying to continue organising by shifting things online. And I just want to check in with three of you about how you’ve maintained a sense of wellbeing. What have you done to keep yourselves… to continue keeping yourselves comforted, and encouraged, and safe? So, again, I’m going to go back to Loraine.

L: Yeah… thank you. So, actually, there is a number of things, because for me, if I’m looking at health, I’m looking at food, I’m looking at exercise, I’m looking at different things. And there has been different ways like how I have used the internet in order to keep myself healthier. One of the things is exercises. I do exercises using the links that I find on YouTube, and then I can do indoors because, during Coronavirus, myself I wasn’t going out at all, but I have also been using, you know, to hang out with friends, really – I feel like Zoom has become more friendlier now because I can see the person and then we just talk, chat, and laugh. Yesterday I was just applying for my HC2 Certificate because, with my situation, I need to… which I renew every six months, so, yeah, it’s all done online. But I guess the other area would be ordering food, for example, because it’s all part of… it’s part of our health and wellbeing, so, yeah, I’ve also been using like to order online, Asda, and stuff like that.

F: Thank you, Loraine. Can I ask you the same question, Michelle? How are you doing, and how have you ensured to take care of yourself, and what would you say, I guess, what would be your advice to the rest of us on how best to make sure that we take care of ourselves and also, if we have the capacity to do so, to kind of help to take care of the community of precarious migrants?

M: I will break it into two parts because, while I was fighting with the Home Office, I had to make a conscious decision to focus on my wellbeing as well, and so in 2014 when I basically was forced out of the NHS, I started to become really depressed, and so from early 2014, I approached my GP for support, and I was referred to the NHS IAPT, which is a psychological service, which they provide you once a week for six weeks therapy. So, during my fight, when I became destitute in 2014, I started having those sessions throughout that period until I got my status in 2018. Now, when you stay in a situation that is extremely stressful, where basically you have to constantly be fighting for survival, right, it does take a toll, and not only the fact that you are destitute, if you’re lucky being provided support for food and accommodation, etcetera, but for me I had stuff going on in my family, so in 2017, I had lost somebody in January, same by March, two people were murdered. So, I then, at that time the IAPT, even though I was taking it, it wasn’t… I wasn’t fully engaging because my situation kind of changed. And then, with the status it changed from Indefinite Leave to Remain Application to Asylum, and so by 2017, I then had to look for a different type of counselling, which was long-term counselling, which I found, and started having by the end of 2017, and that finished at the end of last year. So, during covid, I was having my therapy sessions, via phone with my therapist, whether it was just a telephone call for an hour, or the video chat for an hour. You know, during that time, I also approached my priest for counselling for grief, and stuff like that. So what I would say to people, please seek advice, ask for help. It’s very important that you ask for help, and I think… you know, we all focus so much on the outer, on the… we need a place to stay, yes; we need the food to eat, yes. You know what I mean? But the mental health part is so, so, so, so very important because, for me, from my experience, I feel like that part, by the time I had my documents in hand, the mental… the stress and the anxiety and the depression, started to actually affect my physical health. So, even though I was having therapy last year, right, during covid, even though a lot of people were now coming in, trying to get therapy because of covid, I was already in that place where I was having that type of therapy. Yeah, so… seek help because, you know, I’ve met a lot of people that have… who, after they got their status, they became ill like myself; a lot of people during the fighting, you know, committed suicide. A lot of people became terminally ill. I was reading an article not too long ago, by I think it was Amnesty, and they were saying that, because of covid, that the mental health aspect of refugees and migrants that… that came to the forefront more. You know what I mean? But it’s all… it has always been there, and what I would advise people to do is really seek help. Even though you think you might not need it, seek help; just speak to someone, or what I used to do as well was go onto YouTube, listen to meditations, you know, different things like that. I mean, I am talking a lot, right, because I think I did so much to try and keep myself together, but yet still all that effort, I still at one point started to fall apart, so I cannot imagine somebody who is not putting that type of effort into maintaining themselves, and having to deal with everything else, because I consider myself a strong person, and the way that situation broke me, which I never thought it would have broken me that much, you know, so basically seek advice.

F: Yeah.

M: For your mental health especially. There are free resources out there. IAPT is free. You can ask your GP, or you can self-refer. If you don’t want to do that, there’s meditations, and stuff online. That’s what I… I would advise people to do: seek out some kind of support for your mental health, especially when you’re going through a situation like this that does not last a week; it lasts several years. So, eventually that’s going to build up in your body. Anyway, I think I’m talking too much, so…!

F: Thank you so much… thank you so much, Michelle.

M: I’m going to leave it there.

F: Thank you. So, Runako, I’m going to just add a little bit on to this question about taking care of yourself, because I know, you know, we talk about self-care a lot, and I made a comment the last time I was talking about borders during that lunchtime talk, and I said “I’m self-cared out”. And the reason I said that is because I do totally think that, you know, taking care of ourselves is essential, and at the same time, I think, in this group, and I know certainly in groups with other community organisers and activists, we talk about how important it is that, while we’re taking care of ourselves, the actual structures and barriers that we face in society borders themselves too are the problem. So basically, in the long-term, self-care is not going to liberate us. So, I guess my question to you is, because you are an activist, how do you maintain that balance between taking care of yourself, taking care of the people who are kind of in the cohort that look up to you, or in your circle of influence, while still making sure that you keep the energy levels that you need to maintain for your activism?

R: Yeah, yeah Furaha, I absolutely agree with, you know, your… I guess your comment when it comes to people in precarious situations like ours, a lot of our health is impacted directly by structural issues and systemic issues, and in scenarios like this, it can be easy for other people to simply say, “oh”, you know, “do some yoga” or something, and these things… I mean, in the big picture, they are not going to necessarily liberate anyone or help someone alleviate themselves from, you know, the sustained suffering from things like the hostile environment. And, I mean, you know, I can speak from different perspectives, but for me personally, during the pandemic, for example, I could, you know, do some exercise, go for a run, do some meditation, and all of these things, and they can maybe help me in the short-term manage a bit of anxiety; however, I also know from years of living under the hostile environment, there’s just some things that I’m not able to control personally, and, you know, sometimes it’s just about taking a… I guess a step back, and reaching out to other people, because, you know, a lot of people once again talk about self-care, but I think community care is as important, if not more important, for people to be able to feel like: we’re in this together. Just like the people in this group, there are people out there who are undocumented right now, and I’ve made an observation that, for some people, this pandemic connected them to people in the same situation for the first time in their lives; having lived here some people, you know, for ten years undocumented, and another five years where they may have had a visa in the past. That was the first time they were able to find other people in that situation, and just being able to talk with someone, and say, “hey, this is what I’m going through”, and hear other people say, “ok, this is what... we’re going through this together, and we need to create a chain”. So, personally, I put a lot of my energy into activism, and that’s kept me, I guess… I don’t want to say the word “grounded”, but it’s given me something to focus on so that I don’t end up in my head too much, and have like big amounts of anxieties I can’t imagine. Just knowing that I’m working on something that may improve our lives, even though it seems like it’s an uphill battle all the time is, I guess, something that I can… I don’t know whether to say I can be grateful to be doing stuff like this, however I also know that it’s also one of those things where I know people who want to get involved in these things, but they just don’t know where to start, for example. So if we can reach out to as many people as possible, and say, “hey, we’re working on this. Let’s work together, and put all our energy into this as a community, and build a movement”, then I think it might be helpful to a lot of people’s immediate emotional wellbeing, maybe... maybe. I’m just saying this, but also I think the idea of also seeking help when it comes to, you know, reaching out to GPs, etc, I think, you know, for someone who is undocumented, that’s like… I know the advice that was being given by Michelle is like absolutely great, but what I also notice is, when someone either thinks that reaching out to a GP to say anything is going to flag them up with the Home Office, that’s an… that’s a big barrier for someone to seek help when someone really needs some sort of help with mental health issues, or physical health issues. But another aspect are people who are struggling to register with GPs, even though in the UK people are meant to be able to do that. You know, I can speak of one friend who was trying to register for months and months and months, and had never been registered whilst living in the UK; he’s been living here for more than 12 years, and it’s only after registering, which took three or four months, that he had an assessment – with a psychiatrist, actually; the Doctor said, “oh, maybe you need to see a psychiatrist” – and then that led to him being sectioned for a few weeks, just because it was… it was that serious. It had become that serious; he’d been living in a shed throughout the pandemic because he lost work, and all of these things were happening, and I just imagine, like, how many people are in the situation where, you know, their mental health has totally deteriorated but also, they’re not able to access that type of help that’s needed, or are too afraid to do so. So, yes, it’s pretty hard for people in our situation, and even for me personally, you know, I’ve wanted to like… oh, maybe I should get some therapy or something, and I think about the cost, and I’m just like, I can’t… I simply can’t afford seeing or wanting to see a therapist to help with, you know, any of my mental health stuff, but I think… yeah. I don’t really know what to advise people because, again, each person’s situation is unique. But I do think reaching out to other people is probably one of the best things that people can do, and look out for community, and, yeah, that helps.

M: Can I add something, just from what Runako said? I totally agree that, if you’re in a situation, you don’t want to go to your GP or you do have issues registering with a GP, but this is the thing about… I mean, if you’re able to ask for help because, I mean, for me, I was here a very long time, and then when I was housed in a different area by the charity, I then had to re-register with a GP in that area, and that was an issue because all the documents was with the Home Office. So then I had to approach a charity that helps people – it’s Doctors of the World – they help people register with GP, dentist, etc, etc, etc. So, I think it’s… I agree there’s barriers, but I also think that, you know, it’s the fear people have; they’re afraid to ask for that support, so they wouldn’t know what information is out there, and I think, you know, when I first got into the situation as well, there wasn’t really information. You had to kind of… there was no place that guided you in how to approach the situation that you end up in with the hostile environment, right, because even when I approached the MP, there was certain issues there with the MP. When I really had to move from the property, and I had nowhere to go, I had to search online to find out which charities could help me with accommodation. So, you know, the information I think that people like us are forced into is not easily available, right, and the few… there are charities that would help you with certain things, but not everybody knows about these charities as well, so, yeah, it’s… I do agree with what Runako – I hope I pronounced the name correctly! – said. But I also think, if you’re able to ask for support and seek that support… I had to seek support myself a lot of times, and you made reference to paying for therapy. A lot of the therapies are free. The IAPT at NHS is a free service, and the other long-term therapy that I had was a free service. But, anyway, it’s… I agree with what Runako was saying, but also it’s… I feel like the info… there’s services out there, but a lot of times people don’t know about it.

F: Yeah, and if I can just jump in to say that, isn’t that part of the hostile environment? The fact that this information is not readily available. And also I believe that there is this… the spirit of the hostile environment takes advantage of the fact that a lot of people don’t actually have the privilege of knowing how and where to access this information. And so there is this thing whereby people do live in fear, which is very valid. So I also want to recognise that, you know, knowing where to go for help is in itself a privilege. So, yeah, thank you so much for all of your contributions.

M: Just one more thing I want to add, right? I think also, I was at an advantage because I had been here many years before, and I knew how the system worked. Whereas, it would be completely different for somebody who just arrived. They don’t know how things work, so you are absolutely correct.

F: Yeah. And I guess I want to go back to, you know, talking about the fact that we are still in a global pandemic: we know that before this pandemic, during and even now as we are in a transition period, but we are still in the pandemic, so I should say transition period of coming out of lockdown – question mark! You know, we’ve known always that global health is… global health inequity exists around the world, right, so one of the groups that has been pushed to the margins is precarious migrants – so, undocumented individuals, refugees, and asylum seekers. And I would argue very strongly that to eradicate this pandemic, we need very much to open the floodgates of healthcare for every marginalised individual. So, I guess the conclusion of what I’m trying to say is global health equity is indeed a social justice issue, and not just a social justice issue, but as the name implies, a healthcare issue; a very serious one at that. Now, with that being said, I know that you all engage in activism in various forms, and even if perhaps you don’t consider yourself activists, at least in advocacy. So you have all been active for a number of years on the migration landscape advocating for people in our community of precarious migrants, and I know that your work has taken different forms, and I would just like to know a little bit about how you had to transition your work during the lockdown. So, obviously I think we’re all used to the fact that so many of us have had to begin hybrid work, so perhaps not always in person, but a lot of it online, and I guess I want a little bit of a snapshot of how that has worked for you, and I’m going to go back to Loraine with this one. So, if you can, comment on how that has worked for you: what have you learned, what have been the successes, and perhaps the lower moments, the joys, the triumphs, anything you want to share with us?

L: So, yeah, when the pandemic started, we also were kind of like stuck because we used to meet physically, and Zoom was not very, you know, familiar at that time, but we quickly found someone who taught us how to use Zoom, so we adapted our meetings onto Zoom, but still it wasn’t accessible for everybody. You know, our group, because it has a lot of members, over 60, but online most of the times were around 20/25 max. So, yeah, that’s one thing. But during the same pandemic, we had the… before the pandemic, we were just starting our project called CARAG Housing Foundation, so during the pandemic when people were also being made homeless, there was a need that we should get a house because we had… we managed to secure some funding, so we wanted to get the house so that we could house people who were being made homeless for some reasons. So, we… I guess, at the beginning, maybe we were looking in the wrong places, but when one of the members tweeted about the issue that we are looking for housing, it was that single tweet that brought to us like a lot of opportunities, where a lot of landlords were saying, “oh, we have a house, we have, we have, we have”, so that’s how we managed to get our first house. So, in that sense to us it did… it did work, but also kind of like there were some… few opportunities that came up during coronavirus, like some specific funding that came up just to help people who are struggling, so we were also able to kind of like get some support in that sense, like destitution fund, because of the situation that people are in.

F: Thank you… thank you so much, Loraine. And I’ll move back to Runako, and then I’ll come back to Michelle. So, Runako, can you share a little bit about your activism, because I know, in some of the meetings that I’ve been to, I’ve actually seen you, and you too, Loraine, so obviously our paths have overlapped in our advocacy work, as I refer to myself as an advocate, but both of you, I know that you are activists. So how have you found that you’ve had to adapt to this kind of use of online spaces, and still making sure that you stay tapped into community, especially because, as Loraine has pointed out rightfully, we can’t take for granted that everyone has equal access to internet; everyone has equal access to, you know, different tools to tap into the internet, so laptops, phones, whatever the case may be. So, how have you found… how have you been able to, kind of, keep your activism going, and ensure that you are able to meet up with… I don’t want to say ‘goals’, but to kind of meet up with what you’re trying to do, and what you’re trying to achieve in your own circle of influence?

R: Yeah, these are I suppose really good questions, in that, I guess the… you know, the restrictions that came as a result of the pandemic had the effect of forcing everyone to kind of interact in a… mostly in a virtual sphere, and from my own observations, it worked. For the community that we work with mostly are people who are undocumented, and, you know, undocumented people, they’re generally forced to live in the shadows and on the margins of society, and to sort of not come out even amongst our friends, you know, friends they may have known for years and years and years might not even know some of the situations. So, in some ways the online world... because in some instances, it can be quite anonymous – I’m not talking about Zoom; say, like, WhatsApp chat groups, YouTube – have been spaces for people who are in this situation to be able to talk about their situation: that, “look, I am undocumented, and I’m just reaching out to other people who are undocumented”, even before the pandemic. Just because thinking about meeting in a physical space as undocumented people is something that, you know, is quite risky; more risky than many other sort of types of activities. So, I think when the pandemic hit, it forced a lot of people to then seek out these communities in the online world, and I saw some communities grow, you know, just because people were like, “okay, we’ve lost all our work now. What are we going to do?”. So some communities actually connected and grew because of the online world, but also that’s not everyone, you know, as Loraine and yourself mentioned, there are people who don’t have access to phones, or laptops, or even… they may even have had this, but then because of losing work, they won’t have access to credit or, you know, broadband at home now; how do you pay for all of those things? So, there is a digital divide, but I also noticed, you know, I guess it’s… in some ways, it’s connected more people than would have ever happened if there wasn’t Covid-19… I know people who have literally come up and said, actually, you know, some of the meetings that then went online, the Zoom meetings, the sort of, I guess, community building meetings, for the first time in their lives connected them to people in the same situation. So, yeah, I mean, that’s what I would like to add to what’s already been said without repeating what’s been said. However, I think there is still a lot of hunger to meet in person for a lot of people when it comes to, for example, doing protests, and that type of thing. You know, last summer, there were a couple of protests by undocumented people outside number 10 Downing Street, and once again, there are already calls for this to happen, just because, you know, people want to come out in a safe way, but then just make the issue more visible because, in British society, the sheer idea of an undocumented person or undocumented people is something that is so taboo. People don’t want to talk about them. Before the pandemic, in most cases, people wouldn’t want to talk about this, and the fear is that, now that things are opening up again, people are going to forget about it because it’s been in the media a little bit during the pandemic. Now it’s like, oh, people are going to go back to those busy lives, and I… for me personally, I can already feel that happening. So, I think, yeah, the hunger is to bring things into our physical spaces again whilst also continuing with some of the online gatherings, in order to make it a more national… because, you know, undocumented people live literally everywhere, even though the concentration is probably in major cities like London and Manchester, Leeds etc.

F: Yeah, I hear what you’re saying, and I think it’s very important to kind of highlight the fact that so many, especially I’ve seen this sentiment from so many Black and Brown people, is that they have noted that the gusto with which, you know, this allyship and solidarity was shown in the summer of 2020 is diminishing, and I think that there was actually a paper that spoke to the fact, or that evidenced that this is indeed the case. So I guess it’s that thing of kind of trying to maintain or take advantage of as much of the momentum that was built up over the past couple of months, and keep it going, but we cannot walk alone. We need allies, we need accomplices, to help us to dismantle and even abolish these structures that keep us oppressed and keep us down. And so, with that being said, I’m going to pivot totally to another aspect of our lives, which is how we find joy. So, I know we spoke about wellbeing, and now I just want to begin with Michelle, and say, you know, I know that you’ve done a lot of writing, I know that it’s something that you absolutely love to do, and I want to hear a little bit more about how you use that to build joy in your life, and anything else that brings you joy.

M: How I use the writing to bring joy; that’s the question? For me, what… why I started to write was because I wanted to tell people’s stories like mine. I wasn’t… I didn’t consider myself a writer, because when I was going through what I was going through with the hostile environment, I met so many people. When I was being housed by this charity, and it was a house for women, I met so many different women, people who were here since they were seven end up undocumented. You understand? To me, it was so insane, and myself like Runako, we were documented but we were forced into that status of being undocumented, and at the time I wasn’t seeing any stories in the newspaper about it. So I wanted to write about it, and I got the opportunity with a charity called Migrant Voice where I sourced my own people and wrote their stories up, and that brought me joy because I felt I was doing something to put… you know, to highlight the issue, and to highlight what people really, really are going through, you know, and, so I mean, that brought… that aspect of the writing brought me joy. The poetry brings me joy as well. It’s just like, for right now. I think things last year – my whole being I feel shifted, right, because I was lucky enough to get my stuff sorted, and by the time pandemic hit, I had already fought with the Home Office on my status, fought with the council, got housing, fought with the DWP, got support. So, by the time the pandemic hit, I was in the process of healing, so for right now, what brings me joy is peace, because I was saying to somebody recently, I cannot remember the last time I had felt peace in my… in my brain, in my mind, you know, so… and that filters down to my body. So, feeling peace at the moment, that brings me the most joy. Everything else like socialising with this one, and being creative, and, you know, all of that comes in after but, for me, what I found even more so right now is that peace, because I was in a place of total chaos outside and within myself.

M: And it really… it took a lot of work to even have the peace of mind that I have, which I’m still working on to a certain extent, but, to be honest, for right now, and I think because I’m coming off of having to spend time healing myself, which is a longer time than I expected to take, but which I value, because it teaches me something about myself. So, yeah, just having peace, just to wake up in peace, and not having to… you know, that anxiety, I used to get anxiety so much during the night, and wake up every half an hour, and that took me a long time to deal with. I’m still dealing with that type of insomnia, but that feeling that I’m just feeling in my gut that used to wake me up, I don’t feel that anymore. So, I feel like my mind is relaxing, my body is relaxing, and it’s that… these things that I value, and brings me so much joy at the moment because I feel like, without that as my foundation, I would not be able to do whatever else. You know what I mean?

F: Yeah… yeah. Thank you so much for that, and I think I should also say… perhaps apologise because I don’t want to… you know, just like we need to be very careful about forcing a trauma narrative, or trying to extract stories of trauma. I think it goes the same for trying to force a narrative of joy, especially when we are all going through something very difficult because then we put our siblings in a position where perhaps they may feel like they have to perform joy, whether or not they’re feeling it, and I really do think that we should hold… part of holding space for one another means that we’re accepting the emotions that we’re feeling at this present moment in time, which may not always be joyful, and that’s absolutely okay. So, maybe I will kind of reframe my question, and invite Loraine to take this one on. If we move a little bit, and talk about solidarity, what kind of solidarity would you like to see from people who have never had any experience of the hostile environment, who don’t necessarily understand what we go through from a day-to-day basis? What practical things would you say would be helpful to you, and to the people in your community in Coventry right now?

L: During the pandemic, I’ve seen the Coventry community reaching out. To me that was like an act of solidarity that I never thought CARAG could get, so people were just, you know, some knocking on the door, “we’ve got donations”, “we’ve got this”, or contacting us through our website, “we’ve got this. Where can we take it to?” So for me that was like, “oh, my God, where has all this support been all these years?” I really felt that we were supported, and we had… yeah, I guess abruptly started this cooking project, but I had no idea about who will be delivering because it needs people who have cars, and going around the city to reach to different places that people were, but the community, it… yeah, everything just came together. So, for me, it’s about reaching out and finding out what is going on in your community, and see where you can help. Sometimes, the help that we need is not money, it’s not… it’s not a lot. Even just saying, “hello, how are you? We are here, we are listening”. You know, “if there is anything we can help”, you know, stuff like that makes all the difference. So, it’s about… yeah, listening to what is being said, and, yeah, just helping where you can, and also when, for example, we are doing our protests, or there’s something… that support, standing with us where we are, being with us at that point, to me is everything, because it just shows how much support we… you know, we have. Let’s look at an example of that incident in Glasgow. Wasn’t that amazing?

F: It was.

L: So, that’s exactly… you know, when they were voting… they wanted to deport two men, but the community was… you know, people were… glued themselves under the Police cars, and all of this, and all of that. To me, solidarity can’t be defined any better than that.

F: Thank you… thank you so much, Loraine. I think that’s a fantastic point to start wrapping up on, and I’m just going to open the floor to you all in case you have any closing comments that you want to make. Runako, Michelle, Loraine, feel free to take the floor if any of you has anything in closing that you want to say.

M: I want to just lead off from where Loraine left about solidarity, and, yes, I saw that, and I’m like, “heck, if every community was like that”, but then, you know, I had to remember as well, some people do it differently, because, you know, when I needed somewhere to stay, I had strangers open up their home to me, you know, and I stayed there for two months or whatever before I went into the charity accommodation, and, just going off the name of… the title of the event, which is “We cannot walk alone”. And I did mention to you guys before that, you know, when everything that’s happening, if you… for me personally, with everything that’s happening, if I was to sit and just dwell on it, that’s just a really deep, dark place to go into, but I have to always remind myself, yes, there is bad, yes, there’s the evil, yes, there is all the negativity, but then there’s the other side as well, people who will open their home to a complete stranger, and people still do that to this day where they host undocumented migrants or asylum seekers, etcetera. And for me it’s a beautiful thing to see, and it is such a good reminder that, you know, the world isn’t just full of the hate that we hear a lot about. You know, it’s full of compassion, it’s full of support, it’s full of love, and I personally, during my own struggle with the Home Office, had so much support from people I didn’t know before, but I continue after everything got sorted, we are still friends. You know what I mean? And it’s funny because situations like that, when you think that you have a friend, or whoever, and these are the people who would stick with you, but they don’t; it’s a complete stranger that would do that, and so, yeah, I think, you know, I’ve learnt a lot through the whole experience, I’ve learnt a lot through covid as well. There is balance in the world, but we don’t always see it and hear it. We hear more of the negative, we see more of the negative because it is so… it can be so horrific, right, but, yeah, so for me what I’ve learnt overall is that there’s good people out here, and because of that I myself have learnt to become a better person because of that, because I was extremely independent; I didn’t know how to receive. I love to give but didn’t know how to receive. So, yeah, that’s what I’ll add.

F: Thank you… thank you so much, Michelle. Runako?

R: Yeah, just add to all the sort of wonderful conclusions that have been said by Loraine and Michelle, referencing what Martin Luther King Jr was, you know, his… I think the title of the whole Refugee Week was inspired by what Martin Luther King Jr said in the speech during the civil rights movement, and, I mean, from the energy of that, what I think I felt was that, you know, something to do with, like, we can never be satisfied until there’s justice: until rights are granted to every single human being living in, at that time, of course, the USA, but for us, you know, migrant rights is a… migrant justice is a global movement for justice. And I think, you know, the example that was given by Loraine about Glasgow, where 200 people turned up to resist a deportation, or enforced removal, that’s evidence that there are people who are willing to, you know, put themselves on the frontline against the hostile environment. However, what I would like to see is more and more people, because I believe there are probably a lot more people in the UK who are not supportive of the hostile environment, but who are also supportive of free movement. You know, resisting deportations, that action is great; however we also need to see people turn up at the ballot box when elections come up. Even though at the moment, Labour isn’t necessarily pro-regularising undocumented migrants, as far as I know – the majority of the MPs don’t say a word about it – it’s important to shift their representation so that it becomes one where they say, “look, we’re going to do this”, because we’ve heard in the USA, Joe Biden has just got into power, saying that he was going to regularise undocumented migrants, and give a pathway to citizenship. During the election cycle, during Trump’s presidency, one of the most racist presidents – I’m not going to say in American history, because there’s been plenty probably – but in my consciousness as long as I’ve been alive, he got into power saying that outwardly, explicitly, so why do you not get opposition leaders in the UK saying the same thing? Why? That just goes to show that they’re willing to keep quiet in order to appease that section of the electorate that are anti-migrants, that may be racist, that probably are against a lot of other things, which go against our basic humanity. So, I think that’s important for people to start pushing, because the policymakers are the ones that end up making the policies when they see that the electorate are supportive of something, so people really need to start writing letters, start speaking to their friends, start turning up to vote at actual elections, young people, please, not to say anything about the older people, but I know that a lot of young people tend to lean more to the left and to more progressive type of politics. People need to turn up, because it’s going to be a lot worse in the next few years in the UK, and people are going to suffer if we don’t bring about the change. Thank you.

F: Thank you. Loraine?

L: Yeah, thank you. So, I guess in conclusion, what I wanted to say is the world over we hated the pandemic because it interfered with our basic needs, our right to safety, connection, satisfaction, and things like that. So, in a similar way as undocumented people, as asylum seekers, as migrants, what we are crying for is because our human… our basic needs are not being met, where people have no food, people have no… are not housed, they have no work, they have no benefit, they are not accessing healthcare, and stuff like that. So, it’s the same pandemic that people are afraid of that we have lived all these years, and we keep fighting for. So, when we are asking for people to be given status, it’s because we are asking for the basic human needs which have been interfered with. Thank you.

F: Thank you so much, Loraine. Thank you, Michelle, thank you, Runako. Thank you so much for your wisdom, thank you for your time, thank you for your thoughts. I am sure that our paths are going to keep crossing. I am wishing you and myself too… and every other precarious migrant out there the best in dealing with everything that we’re going through, and I am wishing the abolishment of all borders, and with that being said, I am going to draw our session to a close. Thank you so much.