

Tzeggai Yohannes Deres



Name:
Tzeggai Yohannes Deres

Position/occupation:
Director, Evelyn Oldfield Unit.

Residence:
Lambeth.

“To me sustainability is about working together in order to create a just society that nurtures, empowers and protects every individual.”

Tzeggai came to the UK in 1986 from Eritrea in East Africa and has been a UK Citizen for the last 15 years. In 1994 he became the founding Director of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, which was established by a consortium of funders and agencies that work with refugee community organisations. Having lived in London for 21 years, Tzeggai feels that it’s the diversity and spirit of individual freedom that makes the city so special. “I love the quality of libraries and diversity of media in London. For me it’s the capital of all world cities.”

Sustainability experience

The aim of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit is to develop specialist support to well established refugee organisations to enable them to tackle the needs of the communities they serve. Tzeggai believes that sustainability is key to what he does, “The world is connected and therefore taking responsibility for our locality, city, country and having an international conscience is part of the sustainability of that world.”

Since coming to the UK and working initially for the Refugee Council, Tzeggai has taken on additional roles as a member of the advisory committee of the Government Office for London, a member of Central Governing Body of the City Parochial Foundation, a Deputy Chair of Trust For London, a member of the Board of Consortium of Opportunities For Volunteering, Barbara Melunsky Fund, the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust, Multi – faith Refugee Network, and a member of the Home Office, National Refugee Integration Forum.

Tzeggai emphasises the importance of working together in order to achieve a common aim.

The Refugee Community History Project (RCHP), which won a Charity Award in 2006 in the category of Arts, Culture and Heritage, was a groundbreaking partnership project led by the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and working with 15 refugee community partnerships, the Museum of London and London Metropolitan University. This culminated in a major international exhibition at the Museum of London. The RCHP had recorded individual histories of 170 people, covering their arrival, settlement and their contributions to London. The project has also produced a variety of resources based upon the material collected including website, CD ROMs and a short film collection.

“Sustainability has always been important to me and throughout my professional life my understanding of it has greatly enhanced by ability to network with different sectors. I have a strong belief in people’s potential and individual contributions to quality of life and sustainability is about maximising that contribution through getting connected. Sustainability has helped to enhance my view and understanding of different perspectives and respect those differences. Not knowing about these differences leads to exclusivity.”

For Tzeggai partnership working is key to a sustainable approach and he has worked hard creating bridges between different communities and with different sectors. “Leadership is also vital. I was a member of the advisory committee for the Common Purpose Programme – an international organisation which promotes positive change through networking and partnership of leaders from different sectors.” Tzeggai is particularly proud to have been involved in creating a course, Inspirational Leadership Programme, for emerging community leaders through a partnership between the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, the Home Office and the National School of Government. “Only by understanding governance structures and democratic institutions can community leaders have the capacity and knowledge to make lasting improvements. I’ve also been involved in establishing 12 forums in London that bring together refugee organisations to

share experiences and realise their visions for sustainable communities.”

For Tzeggai the challenge has been convincing people to see the world ‘outside their box’ and helping them understand the benefits it can bring. “People don’t always understand their capacity to contribute to change and we need to provide that help and support to build their confidence – everyone is important. It’s hard work but there are big benefits.”

Sustainability challenges

“Security is a very important foundation for our society. London faces challenges in becoming more sustainable and these issues relate to this concept of security. Two big ones are crime – especially youth crime and unemployment – particularly high in some sectors, including refugee communities. Tackling the volume of traffic in our city is also vitally important for quality of life.

“For my vision of London in 2050 - a city of example and leadership, where there is high and equal quality of life for residents - I think we have very strong foundations, but we have to go further.” Tzeggai believes that change starts in the locality and therefore requires effective interaction and cohesion at neighbourhood level.

“Leadership provides a huge opportunity to realise the vision of a sustainable London and this leadership and vision and values must be effectively communicated. Communication is key at all levels. It’s the result of individual freedom but people always want to see the personal benefits of change and so we need to make it clear that there are benefits but they won’t be realised without every individual making those changes.”

In terms of making changes in our own lives, Tzeggai thinks it’s partly a resource issue. “It’s easier to make changes if you have resources. If you don’t, self-respect and taking responsibility

for yourself and others must be the first step. Help people to step out of their boxes and understand what they can contribute by making small changes. If we’re not open enough to change, whatever seed is sown it can’t take root.”

London Leaders

As a London Leader Tzeggai wants to build greater understanding of sustainability and the world around us. “In terms of how London can improve – it takes working with disadvantaged communities, improving quality of life, influencing policy and sharing experiences widely.”