

The Integration of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Ireland

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The following article is an edited version of the talk Philip Watt gave at the meeting on 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Ireland' held in Liberty Hall, Dublin, on 25 November 1999. The meeting was organised by the Ireland Institute.

The Council of Europe has defined integration as a 'two-way process [whereby] immigrants change society at the same time as they integrate into it'. The World Development summit in 1995 prescribes the goal of integration as 'a society for all' in which people have the right and the ability to participate in decisions affecting their lives.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) developed these statements into a more comprehensive definition, with three key components. Integration is defined by ECRE as:

- *Dynamic and two-way*, placing demands on the receiving society and the individuals and/or communities involved
- *Long-term*, beginning from arrival in the country and concluded when a refugee becomes a member of that society from a legal, social, economic, cultural, and identity point of view, and the integration process extends past the first generation of refugees
- *Multidimensional*, relating both to the conditions for, and actual participation in, all aspects of the economic, social, cultural, civil, and political life of the country, as well as the refugee's own sense of belonging and membership in the host society.

Whilst being a useful starting point, this definition of integration also has its limitations. For instance, the definition does not expressly recognise that racism is a key barrier to integration. It also fails to recognise the issue of when a refugee stops being a refugee.

The needs of refugees change over time, and it is often more useful and accurate to address them in the context of policies aimed at the inclusion of minority ethnic groups, rather than confined to policies limited to the integration of refugees and asylum seekers.

This point becomes of key importance when one considers the factors which influence a country's approach to the integration of refugees. In a

recent review of integration policies across the EU, ECRE concluded that attitudes to integration of refugees and asylum seekers are often determined by the policies of the state towards cultural diversity. In short, if a member state promotes policies (either intentionally or unintentionally) of marginalisation or segregation towards minority ethnic groups, then policies towards asylum seekers and refugees will likely be similarly fashioned.

If, on the other hand, the country's approach to cultural diversity and minority ethnic groups is positive and inclusive, then it is likely that policies towards the integration of refugees and asylum seekers will be based on the same principles.

So what is the official attitude to cultural diversity in Ireland? In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s government policy towards cultural diversity and minority ethnic groups was clearly informed by a policy of assimilation, which is now recognised as a form of exclusion and marginalisation. Policies were designed, either intentionally or unintentionally, to ensure that minority ethnic groups and their needs, particularly Travellers, would become as invisible as possible, with their way of life submerged into that of the dominant population. This was reflected in policies that forced Travellers to settle in houses, and the criminalisation of nomadism.

However, since the mid-1990s we have seen a number of key policy developments which point to a greater recognition that cultural diversity exists in Ireland, and measures are beginning to be put in place to address issues such as racism, and to promote equality. Some examples of these policies include:

- The Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community
- The equality legislation and development of the Equality Authorities
- The government support for European Year Against Racism and the subsequent establishment of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism
- The emergence of measures to promote interculturalism and cultural diversity in the education system.

The evolving approach to the integration of minority ethnic groups, including refugees, into Irish society

In Ireland in recent years, a policy towards the integration of minority ethnic groups has begun to evolve, albeit that this policy appears at times to be *ad hoc*, inconsistent, and disjointed. The clearest articulation of integration policy is in respect of Travellers and Programme Refugees.

1. Travellers

The example of the Task Force on the Travelling People and the recommendations contained within its final report¹, provides both an

approach and a range of measures which could help to inform an ongoing integration policy towards refugees. The Task Force itself was established by the government along partnership lines with representation from a range of statutory and non-statutory bodies, including community groups operating at national level with a remit for Traveller issues. The Task Force Report provided an overview of the key socio-economic issues facing the Traveller community, and a range of measures which need to be put in place to promote Traveller integration in policy areas such as education, enterprise, employment and training, accommodation, and health. The recommendations of the Task Force were written into Partnership 2000, and a range of committees has been developed to implement and monitor the implementation of the Task Force recommendations.

2. The integration of refugees

In respect of refugees, to date, the most comprehensive approach to integration has been developed for Programme Refugees. Special integration measures have been developed by the Refugee Agency, which provide a range of interventions, particularly in settlement supports and language and employment training (the Interact initiative is one example). Other projects, such as Access Ireland, which was developed by the Irish Refugee Council, have a focus on working with Convention Refugees and service providers.

3. Building an anti-racism and intercultural dimension into integration policy

Asylum seekers are now part of a local community, often living in areas with high unemployment and high levels of social exclusion. Some existing communities have felt threatened by the apparent change in the ethnic profile of their area, and this has resulted in incidents of racially motivated harassment directed at people who are perceived to be refugees or asylum seekers. Some community groups have recognised this problem, and are developing small-scale strategies, such as festivals, workshops, and presentations to schools, to try to break down these fears. However, these initiatives are small scale and inadequately funded.

Legislation has a key role to play in protecting refugees from racism. The equality legislation is an important step forward as it will outlaw discrimination in the workplace and in the provision of goods and services. However, legislation in this area is not without its flaws. The Incitement to Hatred Act (1989) has been recognised as being completely inadequate to address racially motivated crime or incitement to such crime, and there have been no successful prosecutions to date. This legislation needs to be reviewed.

The role of the media in addressing racism is also an important one. Some reports and programmes have helped to highlight diversity in Ireland positively, others have contributed to a climate of fear by printing or broadcasting stories on 'floods of refugees', or by labelling refugees as 'scroungers', or alleging that all or most refugees are involved in criminal activity.

As well as the need to address racism, there is a need to develop strategies that aim to build a more intercultural and inclusive society: for example, ensuring that the needs of refugees and asylum seekers are recognised and included in initiatives such as the National Anti Poverty Strategy, and in the Departmental Customer Action Plans developed as part of the Strategic Management Initiative. The need for intercultural education is also beginning to be recognised as a key issue within the school curriculum.

Dispersal

Policies of dispersal are a common response in some other European countries. However, there are concerns about this approach which have been raised by the Council of Europe:

Except possibly for the initial settlement of large population influxes, enforced dispersal of ethnic groups is undesirable because it leads to the break up of families and communities and also carries the unfortunate implication that immigrants are an undesirable or a problem element in the population. Enforced concentration of immigrants is even more unacceptable, amounting to a form of racial segregation.

It has also been demonstrated that dispersal does not work in practice, unless it is carefully planned and resourced, and has the support of refugees themselves. For instance, the Vietnamese Programme Refugees were dispersed to different parts of Ireland, but eventually tended to live near each other, particularly in parts of west Dublin. In other words, there is also an efficiency argument against enforced dispersal, in terms of waste of resources, as well as an ethical argument.

However, it is acknowledged that there are practical difficulties associated with non-dispersal. The absence of accommodation in Dublin has resulted in some asylum seekers sleeping rough or being forced to live in overcrowded conditions. There may, therefore, be a case for proactive policies to encourage new refugees to live in other areas and towns outside of Dublin. The easiest way to achieve this goal would be to open designated reception centres such as those used for the Kosovan refugees, but evidence from other EU member states highlight major problems associated with dispersal. If dispersal policies are used, they must be carefully planned and accompanied by the appropriate level of services and access to employment, etc. They should not be used as a 'burden

sharing' exercise which views asylum seekers as a problem that needs to be shared out.

Direct provision

Direct provision in the Irish context is the approach whereby supplementary welfare payments and rent allowances are replaced by full board and a small living allowance of £15 per week for an adult asylum seeker. Support for renting accommodation, such as flats or bedsits, is replaced by refugee reception centres.

The experience of other countries reveals some of the pitfalls of direct provision, which include:

- Increasing the potential for segregation and further marginalisation of asylum seekers rather than developing policies that promote integration, particularly when the right to work is not granted.
- Limiting the choice of asylum seekers by determining where they are to be accommodated.

Conclusion

There are a number of different challenges to developing an overall approach to the integration of refugees and asylum seekers:

1. The adoption and development of integration policies based on international human rights standards and with reference to the standards adapted to programme refugees
2. The development of a strong anti-racism/intercultural dimension to integration policy
3. The specific inclusion of asylum seekers in integration policy, even if this is only on a temporary basis
4. The establishment of a task force to look at the integration needs of refugees and asylum seekers, with similar terms of reference to the Task Force on the Travelling People.

In conclusion, the development of integration policy should not be based on a view of refugees as a problem, but as part of a wider challenge to the development of a more inclusive and intercultural society in Ireland.

- In December 1999, after this talk had been delivered, the Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform published the report of the interdepartmental working group on the integration of refugees in Ireland, *Integration – a two-way process*. The NCCRI was consulted on this report.

Note

¹ *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community*. Government Publications (1995)

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