

Integration or alienation?

by Tarig Misbah Yousif

Integration of refugees into a host society has long been seen by UNHCR as a permanent solution to the refugee issue.

Refugee integration means building a new life with dignity, becoming an independent and productive member of society, being able to fend for oneself. It is a process by which refugees increasingly participate in all levels of society and become full citizens. However, Convention refugees in Ireland face a score of problems which prevent them from releasing their energies and realising their potential. Two major obstacles relate to language learning skills and employment.

English language skills and employment are inseparable: a good command of English is essential for entering the Irish

job market. Although Fas (a government-funded training scheme) is of paramount importance, its language training component is far from adequate, sorely needing more innovative methods of teaching. Furthermore, even if a refugee is fluent in English, his/her accent remains an identifying characteristic which may trigger discrimination.

Having agonisingly awaited a decision on their application for asylum, for large numbers of refugees refugee status has made no difference in their lives in terms of enabling them to lead an independent dignified life. For some, job-seeking proves harder than asylum-

seeking; for those who do not succeed in securing employment, joblessness means increased alienation.

Much has been written about negative media portrayal since the number of asylum seekers shot up in 1996. Unsurprisingly, government scaremongering tactics in depicting refugees as scroungers have impacted negatively on refugees' job-hunting. The label 'refugee' arouses anti-refugee sentiments among potential employers and many Convention refugees have been condemned to dependency; other qualified refugees have been compelled to take up low-paid and sometimes backbreaking jobs. Medical doctors are an exception as Irish hospitals are in desperate need for their services; even so, qualification recognition and other procedural problems have prevented many from practising their profession in Irish hospitals.

Vietnam refugee, who settled in Northern Ireland and set up his own take-away business, shows the papers he used to escape from Vietnam.



The role of the voluntary sector

The overseas-oriented mandate of most Irish NGOs appears to restrict them from being actively involved in programmes designed for refugees in Ireland. All the organisations working for refugees in Ireland include refugee participation as an integral part of their programmes but this is mostly empty rhetoric. There is no clarity about how they envisage refugees taking part in programmes designed to help them integrate into Irish society. Does refugee participation mean offering them the opportunity to work with these agencies as volunteers? Or is it about refugees telling their stories to schoolchildren? All too often these organisations, which have been formed expressly to support and empower refugees, have less enthusiasm for actually employing refugees. The situation needs urgent rectification if empowerment is to be given any real meaning.

Recommendations

- More funds need to be pumped into language learning projects.
- Convention refugees should be granted full citizenship rights based on principles of recognition and the cele-

bration of difference. Refugees could then participate in economic and social life on an equal footing as Irish citizens; this can be crucial to successful resettlement.

- NGOs and other groups working for refugees need to take the issue of empowerment more seriously by involving refugees in all issues concerning their integration. There is an apparent lack of willingness on the part of such groups to support bodies created by refugees (the issue of capacity building is getting little attention). Moreover very few organisations have taken the difficult decision to recruit refugees.
- Integration of refugees into Irish society should be grounded in a positive self-definition of group difference rather than an assimilationist ideal; in the latter, the privileged groups implicitly define the standards according to which all will be measured.
- More vigorous action needs to be taken to combat racism. The Irish government needs to put in place effective anti-discrimination legislation if the fight against racism is to have any real effect. Most importantly,

state funding should be available for civil society institutions to help combat racism via development education and awareness-raising programmes.

Tarig Misbah Yousif worked for the Sudanese Commissioner's Office for Refugees (see his article in FMR issue 2 entitled 'Encampment at Abu Rakhm in Sudan: a personal account': www.fmreview.org/fmr024.htm). He now lives in Dublin, Ireland, and is the founder of African Development Workers in Ireland, a recently formed body aiming to bring an African perspective to the discussion in Ireland of issues such as debt cancellation, capacity building and a human rights-based approach to development. Email: tarigyousif@eircom.net A longer version of this article appears in *Africans Magazine*, an online magazine and information service for Africans in Ireland (www.africansmagazine.com).

See also 'Human rights have no borders' by Maura Leen in FMR issue 1, p17 www.fmreview.org/fmr016.htm

1 Those recognised as refugees under the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention, as opposed to 'programme refugees' (invited by a government under UNHCR's supervision - eg Vietnamese, Bosnians, Kosovans), who enjoy a well-established structure of welcome and support.

Guide to Irish refugee organisations

Further information on refugee issues in Ireland can be obtained from:

Amnesty International Irish Section
48 Fleet Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.
www.amnesty.ie

Anti Racism Campaign
c/o 10 Upper Camden Street,
Dublin 2, Ireland.
<http://get.to/arc.dublin>
Email: sandeep@gofree.indigo.ie

Association for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Ireland (ARASI)
213 North Circular Rd,
Dublin 7, Ireland.
<http://indigo.ie/~arasi/>
Email: arasi@indigo.ie

Immigrant Solidarity
PO Box 178, Cork, Co Cork, Ireland.
<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/is.html>
Email: immigrantsolidarity@hotmail.com

Irish Centre for Migration Studies
University College, Cork, Ireland.
Tel: 00 353 21 902889
<http://migration.ucc.ie/immigration>
Email: migration@ucc.ie

Irish Council for Civil Liberties
Dominick Court, 40-41 Lower Dominick St,
Dublin 1, Ireland.
www.iccl.ie
Email: iccl@iol.ie

Irish Refugee Council
40 Lower Dominick St,
Dublin 1, Ireland.
www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie
Email: refugee@iol.ie

National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism
26 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.
<http://homepage.eircom.net/~racism-ctee/refugees.html>
Email: nccri@eircom.net

Refugee Project of the Irish Bishops' Conference

169 Booterstown Avenue, Blackrock,
County Dublin, Ireland.
Tel: 00 353 1 288 4713.
Fax: 00 353 1 283 4161.
Email: refproject@eircom.net

Refugee Protection Policy Group
<http://members.tripod.co.uk/rppg/>
Email: rppg@irishrefugeepolicy.org

Residents Against Racism
http://sites.netscape.net/rarireland/racist_diary.html
Email: residents_against_racism@ireland.com

SPIRASI
Spiritan Asylum Services Ireland
213 North Circular Road, Dublin 7,
Ireland.
Tel: 00 353 1 8683504
Email: spiro@indigo.ie

UNHCR Liaison Office
27 Upper Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin 2
Email: iredu@unhcr.ch