

# Differential treatment of refugees in Ireland

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**The Irish government makes considerable efforts to resettle Syrian refugees arriving through the UNHCR resettlement process but offers no support to those refugees – some of whom are also from Syria – who individually seek asylum under the international protection system.**

In response to the war in Syria, the Irish government undertook to welcome 4,000 refugees. Civil society and the Irish people at large shared the feeling of solidarity for those who suffered in Syria and the cry ‘refugees welcome’ has been widely articulated over the last year. The Irish state is putting significant effort and assistance into supporting the programme for Syrian refugees resettled under the process organised by the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, as a part of their commitment to welcoming these refugees.

Between its beginning in 2000 and late November 2016, the UNHCR-led resettlement programme supported 1,705 vulnerable persons from 27 countries, including Iraq and Syria, to start a new life throughout Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Under its recent commitment to welcome 4,000 Syrian refugees, the government commenced resettlement planning for families based in refugee camps outside Syria. By mid-2016 several cohorts of Syrian people had arrived in Ireland and had been placed in a number of locations throughout the country. Financial resources are allocated by the government to support people through the first year of transition, to provide immediate assistance to the families to engage with

schools, health services, housing authorities and so on. Statutory agencies are mobilised to ensure adequate access for the refugees to services. Interpretation, child care or other immediate specific needs of refugees are taken into account and provided for where possible. Community engagement and integration are also a part of the resettlement support process. This well thought-out and practical approach to resettlement, although limited to possibly little more than one year, would be a credit to the Irish government, if considered outside the broader context of its immigration policy and practice.

At the same time as these refugees are being resettled, 4,209 asylum seekers – who have made their own way to Ireland – are awaiting decisions on their protection claims and are accommodated in open prison conditions under the system called Direct Provision under which asylum seekers are not allowed to work, study or cook for themselves. There have been 109 applications from Syrian asylum seekers registered in 2016 in Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

It can take up to ten years before a final decision on the granting of asylum is made by the authorities. No structured

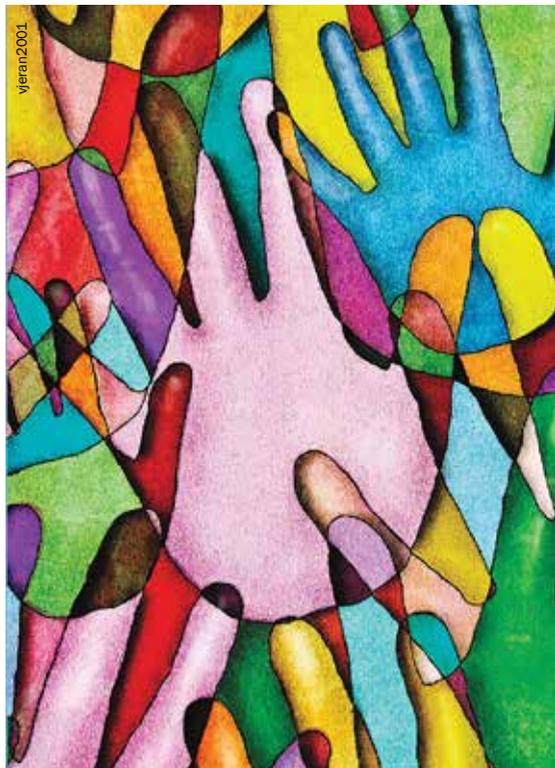
support is afforded to those people who individually sought asylum under the international protection system and eventually did get recognition of their status. Former asylum seekers are left to their own devices to support themselves through the transition to independent living, and inevitably face poverty and hardship.

### Government position on 'balanced migration'

The new government elected in early 2016 laid out its position on migration in the Programme for a Partnership Government, in a section entitled 'Ensuring a Balanced Migration'.<sup>3</sup> The Programme commits to offering safe haven to, and ensuring integration of, refugees coming to Ireland under the resettlement programme. It does not speak in the same terms about refugees seeking protection through the system established under international refugee law. The government's position on migration is heavily preoccupied with border-protection concerns. The repeated references to measures such as 'tackling illegal migration', 'getting tougher on abuses' by 'bogus asylum seekers' and to facilitating removals hardly represent a balanced policy.

The wording of the Partnership Government Programme implies that there are two categories of migrants – good migrants and bad migrants. Good migrants are welcome to Ireland and their needs are recognised, while bad migrants are not welcome and are to be removed. This approach fuels prejudice against asylum seekers and does not contribute to building an inclusive and equal society that affords migrants equal recognition, voice and opportunities.

With its preoccupation with border protection concerns, the Programme missed the opportunity to formulate a comprehensive and fair response to inward migration, and particularly to the reception conditions of people seeking protection in Ireland. The Programme acknowledged the negative impact of the Direct Provision system on the family life of asylum seekers but did not recognise that Direct Provision



Cover image from Mayo Multilingual Support Services Booklet <http://bit.ly/MIApdf>

is detrimental to child development, personal freedom and dignified living.

### Moving out of Direct Provision

To clear the backlog of applications from persons who had been awaiting their protection status determination for over five years, a significant number of asylum seekers received their status during 2015 and 2016. This was a major breakthrough and a 'release' for those trapped in the complexities of the Irish protection process for up to a decade or, in some cases, even longer. Even after the final recognition of their status, however, there is an almost complete absence of targeted support of any kind for a transition to independent living and settling of these refugees into communities – just a couple of token measures such as an information booklet (*Your Guide to*



*Independent Living*) and information sessions offered on a quarterly basis to the residents of the centres who received their status.

Refugees continue to live on an allowance of €19.10 per week and are expected to find their own way through intricate bureaucratic procedures such as applying for an immigration card and social welfare benefit, registering for social housing, finding private rented accommodation and negotiating Housing Assistance Payment. Refugees are expected to move out of the Direct Provision accommodation but are not even paid the costs of travelling to view houses, so they must try to fit the phone calls and travel costs into their €19.10 weekly budget.<sup>4</sup> One refugee woman disclosed that she was granted €16 train fare to relocate with all her personal and household belongings from the Centre to another location. Families are left living in dire poverty, paying back

loans taken from friends or ‘loan sharks’ to cover their relocation expenses.

### Comparative observations

The Programme for a Partnership Government sets the tone for immigration policy and practice and is currently sending out a divisive message to service providers and to the public. Its position underlines the differential treatment by the state, whereby the needs of resettled Syrian refugees are well taken care of while the needs of those moving out from Direct Provision appear not to matter. Such preferential treatment is an unfair policy, which deepens inequality in society and can trigger frustration or even conflict between different vulnerable groups. Syrian refugees who seek asylum in Ireland through the general system of international protection would find it hard to reconcile why their compatriots who arrived in Ireland through the UNHCR process are offered local authority housing and a range of other supports, while they have to struggle to find affordable private rented accommodation (in the context of the current severe housing crisis in Ireland) and to go through cumbersome transition process with no support.

Treating those who have sought protection on the basis of the Refugee Convention procedures differently from those who are resettled through the UNHCR process emerges as a worrying concern for those working in the sector. Concerns about the way the Irish state is treating refugees should be challenged by human rights agencies nationally and internationally alike. This disregard of equality, the core human rights principle, needs to be addressed in respect of national equality legislation and constitutional, European and international human rights law.

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1. <http://bit.ly/OMI-Ireland>
2. As at September 2016
3. Section 11.10 [www.merrionstreet.ie/MerrionStreet/en/ImageLibrary/Programme\\_for\\_Partnership\\_Government.pdf](http://www.merrionstreet.ie/MerrionStreet/en/ImageLibrary/Programme_for_Partnership_Government.pdf)
4. See Irish Refugee Council (2016) *Transition: from Direct Provision to life in the community* <http://bit.ly/IrishRefCouncil-Transition>