

3.8 Intercultural & Migration Issues

**CORE POLICY OBJECTIVE:
INTERCULTURAL & MIGRATION ISSUES**

To ensure that all people can contribute to developing the underpinning values and meaning of society and can have their own cultures respected in this process, and to ensure that Ireland is open to welcoming people from different cultures and traditions in a way that is consistent with our history, our obligations as world citizens and with our economic status

Respect for and recognition of their culture represents an important right of people within every society. Culture is defined by UNESCO as “the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs”.

Many people in Ireland today – particularly Travellers, immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers among others – do not experience a society where the majority population respects their cultures. In fact, as we become more racially diverse, it becomes evident that Irish society is capable of being as racist as any of our European neighbours who live in mixed racial societies. Government policy should encourage the creation of a multi-racial, inclusive society.⁷⁰ The establishment of the office of the Minister of State for Integration was a welcome move in this direction. However, more progress is needed in this area.

The Key Challenge of Integration

The rapid internationalisation of the Irish population in recent years presents this country with a key challenge – that of avoiding the mistakes made by many other countries through integrating rather than isolating these new migrant populations. Immigrants make up approximately ten per cent of the Irish labour force a figure that is unlikely to change significantly over the next few years, even when account is taken of emigration levels. The aforementioned CSO population projections (see section 2) also suggest that the immigrant population will continue to expand over

⁷⁰ Issues concerning migrant workers are dealt with in section 3.3.

forthcoming decades once the national and international economies have recovered. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that this is a major policy agenda and one that requires immediate attention. Some of this can be addressed by commitments in the national partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, to establish a new framework to address the broader issue of integration policy.

It is worth noting the comments of President McAleese on this issue; delivered in a speech to the British Council in London in March 2007. There she stated that “drawing these newcomers deeply and happily into every facet of Irish society is one of the most important social issues we face over the next few decades...As one of the world’s great exporters of people, as a culture steeped in the emigrant experience, we have both the challenge now, and the chance, to make the emigrant experience in Ireland something to be truly proud of”.

Despite the fact that we have focused principally on the problems facing refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants, it is important to recognise that other groups, such as Travellers, also require their culture to be respected as of right.⁷¹ Implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force on the Travelling People has progressed with the establishment of the structures recommended by the report. However, it is now very important to ensure that the recommendations of the report are fully implemented.

Migrant Workers

Asylum-seekers are not the only foreigners who have come to Ireland in numbers over recent years. Many Irish companies recruited staff from abroad and various assessments of the performance of the Irish economy over the past decade have identified the input of these workers as of importance to the achievement of our economic growth over the period up to 2008. Others arrived here from new EU member states and many other countries. Without this increased number of skilled workers from outside Ireland, our economy would not have sustained its high growth rates during those years.

A key requirement in this context is the need to integrate immigration policy with refugee and asylum-seeking policy. It also requires a recognition and acceptance of the importance of equality of respect and esteem in this area. We also note the need for more detailed information on the number of migrant workers living in Ireland. It is generally accepted that the Census 2006 figures were likely to be an

⁷¹ We have addressed other issues concerning Travellers in a number of other sections of this review.

underestimate of the true picture – for example the Census found that there were 63,276 Poles when the figure is generally accepted to be around 100,000 and it also reported that there were 16,633 Chinese when the figure is likely to be between 60,000 and 100,000. We welcome the *Towards 2016* commitment to dedicate resources to investigating further the size of these groups and we look forward to its results. While some members of these communities have left and are likely to leave over the next year or two, the provision of this information is important for the policy formation process and will be a challenge for Census 2011

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

For many years across the world the number of refugees forced to flee from their own countries in order to escape war, persecution and abuses of human rights was declining. In its most recent report the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) signalled a sizeable reversal of this trend. By the end of 2008, the latest period for which comprehensive statistics are available, the total population of concern to UNHCR was estimated at 42 million persons, including 15.2 million refugees; 827,000 asylum-seekers; 604,000 refugees who had repatriated during 2008; and 26 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) protected/assisted by UNHCR (UNHCR, 2009).

Irish people have a long tradition of solidarity with peoples facing oppression within their own countries, but that tradition is not reflected in our policies towards refugees and asylum-seekers. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that Ireland should use its position in international forums to highlight the causes of the displacement of peoples. In particular Ireland should use these forums to challenge the production, sale and free access to arms and the implements of torture.

Table 3.8.1 shows how the number of asylum-seekers in Ireland increased between 1992 and 2002. Since then the numbers declined and in 2009 they dropped below 3,000 for the first time in more than a decade. The main countries of origin of the 2009 applicants were Nigeria (21.2 per cent), Pakistan (9.6 per cent), China (7.2 per cent), DR Congo (3.8 per cent) and Zimbabwe (3.4 per cent).

The figures for asylum-seekers in 2002 represented the highest number of applications on record. In response the government amended the 1996 Refugee Act and created two independent statutory offices for the processing of asylum applications: the Refugee Applications Commissioner and the Refugee Appeals Tribunal. Additional staff and resources have been allocated to speed up the processing times for asylum applications; however the delay for some applicants is

still considerable. The Refugee Legal Service has also been given more staff and resources.

Table 3.8.1: Applications for asylum in Ireland, 1992-2009

Year	Number	Year	Number
1992	39	2001	10,325
1993	91	2002	11,634
1994	362	2003	7,900
1995	424	2004	4,766
1996	1,179	2005	4,323
1997	3,883	2006	4,314
1998	4,626	2007	3,985
1999	7,724	2008	3,866
2000	10,938	2009	2,689

Source: Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner Monthly Statistics (January, 2010).

While asylum-seekers are assigned initial accommodation in Dublin, most are subsequently allocated accommodation at locations outside Dublin, pending completion of the asylum-seeking process. The Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) was established to perform this task. As of December 2009 RIA had 54 accommodation centres including two reception centres across Ireland. A total of 6,494 people were resident in these centres (RIA, 2009: 14-15).

The policy of “direct provision” employed in almost all of these centres results in these asylum-seekers receiving accommodation and board, together with €19.10 per week per adult and €9.60 per child. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that this is an inadequate amount of money. Furthermore, over time this sum has remained unchanged and its value has therefore been eroded by inflation. To assess the impact of inflation on the real value of these payments table 3.8.2 calculates the decreasing buying power of these sums since the introduction of the euro currency on January 1st 2002. Prior to the arrival of the euro payments equalled £15 per week per adult and £7.50 per week per child.

Table 3.8.2: The Real Value of Direct Provision Payments, 2002-2009

Year	Inflation rate	Real Adult Value	Real Child Value	% devaluation versus 2002
Start	2002	€19.10	€9.60	-
2002	4.6%	€18.22	€9.16	4.60%
2003	3.5%	€17.58	€8.84	7.94%
2004	2.2%	€17.20	€8.64	9.96%
2005	2.5%	€16.77	€8.43	12.22%
2006	4.0%	€16.10	€8.09	15.73%
2007	4.9%	€15.31	€7.69	19.86%
2008	4.1%	€14.68	€7.38	23.14%
2009	-4.5%	€15.34	€7.71	19.68%

Source: Calculated from CSO (2010:2)

Over these eight years inflation has decreased the buying power of these payments by over 19 per cent. Even if there is some justification for such a small income support payment for these asylum-seekers receiving accommodation and board it is incomprehensible that it should be allowed to constantly decrease in real terms year after year. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that these direct provision payments should be increased immediately to at least €65 a week for an adult and €38 for a child. The change would have minimal cost and provide some small improvements in the subsistence life being lead by these asylum-seekers.

Ireland has both a moral and legal responsibility towards refugees and asylum-seekers. As a nation whose own people have themselves experienced the pain of emigration in the past, we should be to the forefront in implementing our obligations under the 1951 UN Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs), already playing a major role in addressing the many issues that arise in this context, should be resourced to continue and develop their work.

Asylum-seekers are among the most excluded and marginalised in Ireland, yet they are treated in a very unjust way by Irish society. The single most important issue in this context is the fact that they are denied access to employment. Consequently we propose that asylum-seekers who currently are not entitled to take up employment should be allowed to do so with immediate effect. Removing this restriction would have a major impact on reducing their poverty and exclusion. In

this context we regret the ending of the FAS asylum seekers project with no replacement giving entry to the labour market.

Policy Proposals on Intercultural & Migration Issues

- **Develop and resource a cultural policy which involves a dynamic conserving of traditions and beliefs, while also developing a vision for the future which incorporates hope, confidence and involvement.**
- **Implement the commitment in *Towards 2016* to establish a new framework to address the broader issue of integration policy. In doing so recognise that this is a key policy objective necessary for the long term wellbeing and stability of Irish society.**
- **Recognise the right to work of all asylum-seekers whose application for asylum is at least six-months old (and who are not entitled to take up employment).**
- **Provide fully resourced language training for migrants and asylum-seekers.**
- **Give special consideration to gender and cultural sensitivities of migrants and asylum-seekers.**
- **Ensure proper protection and care of minors, while safeguarding their rights and the integrity of the migration and asylum processes.**
- **Give to asylum-seekers on ‘direct provision’ who are more than six months awaiting the processing of their application, equal rights to accommodation and other social welfare provision, in line with the rights enjoyed by other Irish residents.**
- **Immediately increase the weekly allowance allocated to asylum-seekers on ‘direct provision’ to at least €65 a week for an adult and €38 for a child.**
- **Increase the winter and summer clothing allowance for asylum seekers to €200 paid twice a year (€400 in total).**

- **Provide access to free full-time education, certified courses and public health education for migrants and asylum-seekers.**
- **Ensure that appropriate measures are taken to address the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation.**
- **Recognise that prostitution is violence in its own right.**
- **Government should argue that the production and sale of arms and instruments of torture be curtailed and should lobby for the elimination of child soldiers.**