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. Policy should encourage the creation of a multi-racial, inclusive society.

Worldwide the number of refugees forced to flee from their own countries in order to escape war, persecution and abuses of human rights is declining. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) cared for about 27 million people in the mid 1990s. This was the highest level of demand for its services ever. In 2003, the latest year for which comprehensive statistics are available, the overall number of people in need of help declined to 17.1 million (2004:2, 11).

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. 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.

The number of asylum-seekers in Ireland increased between 1992 and 2002. Since then the numbers declined reaching 7,900 in 2003 and 4,766 in 2004. The January 2005 statistical report of the RIA indicates that there were 6,127 asylum seekers in ‘direct provision’. These came from 98 different countries and include 1,164 (19 per cent) who are Irish born children. The policy of ‘direct provision’ results in asylum-seekers receiving accommodation and board, together with €19.10 per week per adult and €9.60 per child.[1] CORI Justice Commission believes that this is an inadequate amount of money and should be increased immediately to at least €50 a week for an adult and €25 for a child.

Asylum-seekers are not the only foreigners who have come to Ireland in substantial numbers over recent years. Many Irish companies have also recruited staff from abroad and recent economic assessments of the performance of the Irish economy have identified the significant input of these workers to the achievement of our recent growth.

In the last year, 50,000 people from the 10 new EU states have been among those who have come to work in Ireland. Without this increased number of skilled workers from outside Ireland, our economy would not have sustained its high growth rates. In that context CORI Justice Commission welcomes the recently published National Action Plan Against Racism: Planning for Diversity (2005). Its implementation will play an important role in forming a cohesive, comprehensive policy to ensure that the new diversity of cultures and ethnic minorities within Ireland is respected as an enrichment of our society. This approach needs 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.

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. The single most important issue to be addressed is the fact that they are denied access to employment. Consequently we propose that the right to work of all asylum-seekers whose application for asylum is at least six-months old should be recognised. Implementing this proposal would have a major impact on reducing their poverty and exclusion.

Although Travellers have been part of Irish society for a long time their culture is not respected by many people. Implementation of the recommendations of the 1995 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.

Policy Proposals on Migration and Interculturalism

- 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.
- Introduce a fair, efficient, effective and comprehensive ‘green card’ system for migrant workers seeking employment in Ireland.
- Develop the National Plan against Racism so that it is effective in tackling the issue of racism.
- Integrate refugee and asylum seeker issues into mainstream migration policy.
• 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 at present).
• Give special consideration to gender and cultural sensitivities of asylum-seekers.
• Ensure proper protection and care of minors, while safeguarding their rights and the integrity of the asylum process.
• Provide sufficient financial supports for voluntary organisations which care for refugees and asylum-seekers.
• Provide special labour-market integration measures that address the special needs of immigrants, especially refugees.
• Provide that the trans-national Protocol on Organised Crime is adopted in full into Irish law, especially the section and definitions relating to the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation.
• Implement fully the recommendations of the Task Force on the Travelling People.

For CORI Justice Commission the critical test of Government policy generally is its treatment of those who are most excluded. Many immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, are in this category. Government policy in this area leaves a great deal to be desired.