

'A Trans-national Network: Hearing the voices of Refugees in Policy and Practice in the European Union'

Co-ordinated by the North of England Refugee Service,
in partnership with
ACCESS-Ireland and Associazione Rieti Immigrant

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A project providing a forum for collating and comparing Good Practice across three European Union member states in relation to the ***effective involvement of Refugees themselves in processes of policy and practice formulation and implementation centred on the issue of Integration.***

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North of England
REFUGEE SERVICE



REFUGEE SOCIAL INTEGRATION PROJECT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The summary report outlines key findings and recommendations emerging from the research project, 'A Trans-national Network: Hearing the voices of refugees in policy and practice in the European Union', (January – October 2000).

The Governments of several EU member states have recently moved towards developing integration strategies that seek to include those persons recognised as refugees as full members of society. This project has produced evidence to show that refugees have a focal role to play in the processes through which integration policy is developed and in how inclusion strategies are appropriately operationalised for the integration process to be successful.

Project findings are drawn from the direct personal experiences of the process of integration of forty-five individuals, men and women, from seventeen countries of origin or ethnic groups, who as refugees have settled in Ireland, Italy and the UK. Through the process of the Network understandings of what and of whom integration must involve in order for it to be successful were shared within and between refugee groups, refugee agencies, policy makers and service providers in each of the three EU member states. The purpose of this inclusive and collaborative process was to identify Good Practice and explore realisable, evidenced ways forward.

1. Integration: 'Mechanical' and 'Organic'

- A central finding from the research project identifies that current policy initiatives and resources are primarily focused on the 'mechanical' and instrumental aspects of integration to the exclusion of 'organic' processes relating to the central importance of social inclusion from an early stage of settlement. In that such mechanical measures are targeted at refugees, they amount to a one way assisted process of integration that fails to address the fact that integration in the fullest sense of the refugee self-definition must necessarily be a two way process in practice, involving refugees and local communities. Any strategy that is based on a reduction of the definition of integration to its mechanical aspects will not be effective in promoting integration in the fullest sense of its meaning.

The project enabled refugee participants to establish a self-definition of integration which produced two parallel themes, which we have termed 'mechanical and organic', within the overall concept. Mechanical integration relates to an insertion or incorporation of incomer's into host systems and structures. Organic integration relates to inclusion in the sense of belonging in and to the community, which is central to the self-definition of integration.

While 'mechanical' measures address many of the requirements self-identified in order for integration to happen, they amount to what is essentially a *one way assisted process* that incorporates or inserts the individual *into* 'the system' in order that they may lead an independent and functional life. In themselves they offer no guarantee that the individual will ever feel fully integrated, as they do not provide a strategy for social inclusion. Individual experiences evidenced that the feeling that integration had not happened remained both with those who benefited from the existence of specialist services in the host country and those to whom none were available.

A second aspect of integration exists relating to the need for a more 'organic' sense of inclusion and belonging in and to the community, and a feeling that one's individual identity can be fully developed and lived. This is what changes a place of refuge into a home and existence into life. In the organic sense individuals integrate *with* host communities in what must necessarily be a *two way process*, involving both refugees and the host community itself.

However, 'organic' aspects seem not to have attracted the attention of policy makers in that they are seen as outside a legislative or structural framework. There is little activity in terms of policy or resources aimed at promoting integration in the 'organic' sense, yet the experience of refugee participants shows that social inclusion does not happen on its own and, as a two way process, cannot happen through their individual or collective efforts alone.

Any genuine commitment to promoting integration in the sense that encompasses refugees' own self-definition will only be effective if it includes a strategy for social inclusion that addresses attitudes and perceptions on which prejudice, intolerance, discrimination and racism are founded. The political will to foster a climate of willingness, understanding, awareness, acceptance and multiculturalism is central to any effective integration strategy. The acceptance that a place exists for refugees in the host society and community is an essential pre-requisite for the *possibility* of integration (as belonging) to exist.

Building a successful integration environment is a responsibility of the host society and of the host governments. Local communities should be the primary focus of initiatives to promote integration, tackle social exclusion and combat racism in all its manifestations. Local community is what makes 'organic' integration possible. Integration happens first in local communities because this is where people live.

The project has identified critical factors in operationalising 'organic' integration, which would promote opportunities for reciprocity and active citizenship within local communities. This is of particular importance in the context where Governments have implemented policies of planned compulsory dispersal of asylum seekers. Dispersal has typically been into areas with little or no previous knowledge/experience of hosting or supporting the settlement process of asylum seekers and refugees and no established refugee community networks. While refugees confirm that the foundations for successful and early integration lie in conditions of first settlement, the project identified how, in practice, dispersal is creating conditions of immediate settlement that effectively disallow participation in the community. These processes are exclusionary and mitigate directly against the possibility of reciprocal relations being established, thereby creating an identifiable and stigmatised group in the community. In addition, asylum seekers are being dispersed into areas and communities which are themselves suffering social and economic marginalisation/exclusion, so that integration must be addressed through measures other than its promotion through the labour market.

The project addresses *the problems faced by refugees in integrating* in the European context, where successful integration would enable refugees to become active community participants/citizens contributing equally to the host society and community. As such the findings should help re-frame thinking away from 'the problem of refugees in Europe' – where refugees are held responsible for the failure to integrate – to the problem that European states have in creating a positive integration environment. This in turn would aid the essential need to unburden refugees from the categoric label that stigmatises them and precludes acceptance in the community.

Recommendations:

- The definition of integration on which policy is founded must embody the meanings of refugees themselves. Policies based on a reduction of the definition will reduce the effectiveness of any integration strategy.
- The possibility of belonging must exist. In order for integration to be allowed to happen there must be a fundamental acceptance within the host society and in local communities that there is a place for refugees in that society. This necessitates the implementation of positive measures to enhance race and community relations. The

issue of racism both as cause and consequence of non-integration is central. Racism impacts heavily on the refugees themselves and threatens the very security and protection they sought in the host country.

- Integration is a process that must be promoted through both its 'organic' and 'mechanical aspects', which are mutually dependent/implicit. Whilst most policies and resources are targeted at the mechanical level, these cannot be successful in the absence of a strategy for social inclusion through attention being given to the promotion of belonging in the social and individual sense. The centrality of organic processes must be recognised and combined with the mechanical to provide holistic models of integration.
- Integration must be a two way process in practical reality, with intrinsic roles and responsibilities for both refugees and the host community. It is critical that real involvement of both refugees and the host society is engaged and that this engagement is framed within an anti-racist and multicultural discourse.
- The possibility of integration, and the extent, to which it is successful, is dependent on the conditions of immediate settlement.
- Successful integration is therefore a combination of acceptance of and promotion of belonging, alongside a human rights based framework, which together provide the environment for social and economic inclusion.

2. Refugees as active agents in the process of integration policy development and practical implementation

- A central finding of the research project identifies the necessity of recognising complementarity in the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders to the two way process of integration. It is clearly evident that refugees themselves are a valuable resource with a vital and integral role to play in supporting the integration process. However, refugees can only perform this role if there is a commitment to developing effective mechanisms and structures for hearing and enacting their voiced experience. This would ensure that policy development is evidence based. The implementation of such an inclusive policy development model would ensure that refugees are practically enabled and empowered to be active agents in the process of their own integration rather than merely the target or object of it.

Through the process of Network the various 'stakeholder' participants came to understand how refugees themselves are and should be recognised as a vital resource in the integration process. The project showed that refugees are a source of expert and regional knowledge to inform an effective and inclusive policy development process. They are central to the process of building mutual understanding, awareness and trust on which full acceptance and belonging in the community depend. They can be partners in training service providers and in delivering services. They can offer practical assistance and emotional support to asylum seekers and other refugees through cultural and community organisation. All these roles are an important resource and valuable asset for any truly effective integration strategy.

However, the voiced experience of refugees also shows that they are the weakest resourced party to the integration process. They are a wasted resource through lack of practical empowerment to apply their expert knowledge and to use their skills as active agents in the process of their own integration. Their experiences are more typically of objectification and exclusion in the process. Their experiences of marginalisation, vulnerability and insecurity are compounded by offers of partnerships, from NGO's and others, that turn out to be neither genuine nor one's based on equal stakeholder

involvement. This is neither enabling nor empowering. Our findings showed that these exclusionary processes, whether 'witting' or 'unwitting', led to refugees experiencing added frustration, exhaustion, de-motivation and scepticism.

That is, in the two way process of integration, refugees are denied active participation by:

- Objectification, marginalisation and exclusion
- Consultations that lead to hijacking of ideas (i.e.: their expertise is only resourced through its appropriation by others)
- Offers of partnerships that turn out to be disempowering because they are neither genuine or inclusive
- Resources that are wasted on ineffective initiatives before refugees are called upon to identify the specific problems to be solved
- A lack of 'orientation' knowledge of host country systems, structures, funding and rights
- A lack of funding to NGO's and Refugee Community Organisations to enable self-development and relevant support based on self identification of need
- A cashless systems
- The 'hidden' costs of volunteering
- An absence of influential networks
- Frustrated efforts, demotivation, exhaustion, scepticism and consultation fatigue, which all reinforce isolation and social exclusion

In practice then, while refugees are seen as one half of the equation in the two way process of integration, in reality they are not practically enabled and empowered to perform their part. At the same time, the host community, which is the other half of the equation, is not partaking in the process as there is no movement being encouraged from them. In this context integration remains an unequal process and cannot succeed.

Recommendations:

- Evidence show that those who are the target beneficiaries of a policy must be a part of the process through which they receive those benefits in order for that policy to be effective. This means that the inclusion of refugees in integration processes should be recognised as integral to Best Value rather than framed in terms of added value.
- In that it is recognised that integration is a two way process, it must be a two way process in operational reality. Refugees must be partners in research that forms the basis of evidence-based policy development and in the structures through which policy is implemented in practice. Partnerships must be genuinely inclusive (and not merely extractive) and ones of parity. Partnerships are only as effective as they are genuine. The experience of all stakeholders identifies that inclusive decision making mechanisms and partnerships in delivery of services are not simple processes in practice.
- It is, therefore, a recommendation of this Network that those who search for Good Practice in integration should recognise that **Good Practice lies in Process itself**. Inclusion derives from a process that is itself inclusive. Whatever the structural and legal framework that exists in the host society, the effectiveness of the available support and services depends on the process through which they are made available; that is, how needs are researched/identified, how policy is developed and how services are designed and delivered. Enabling and empowering refugees to be an integral part of the process of their own integration promotes and encourages active citizenship as opposed to dependency and marginalisation.

3. Implications for future policy on integration:

- In order for refugees to take an integral and equal part in the process of integration, they need to be enabled to build capacity. Evidence from the UK Government's Social Exclusion Unit acknowledges the cost of involving all people who are marginalised within society in a process of active citizenship.
- NGO's have a particular responsibility to identify with clarity the remit of their role as representatives of the refugee voice. This has particular resonance for NGO's as they develop as service providers. Service providers have a duty to respond to their users' needs and recognise the rights of users to involvement in the development and delivery of those services. The Network discovered that NGO's are also a critical point in interfacing refugees into the wider society. They therefore need resourcing for the duality of this role.
- The Network discovered that many of the participating policy makers wanted to interface directly with refugee voices and the practices of NGO's. However, such a commitment requires additional time and resources to enable the positive lessons emerging from this Network to be actualised.
- Future projects focused on promoting the process of integration need to consider these critical issues of resourcing across all three areas.

4. Evaluation feedback on the Network process:

The accompanying Process Evaluation Report sets out the responses and analysis regarding the process of the Trans-national network. Overall conclusions are drawn about the process itself from the feedback received from all participants and the report offers a summary of the main findings and identifies recommendations arising from the lessons learnt to inform future projects.

The findings produced by this Network were themselves dependent on the extent to which the Network process was itself inclusive. In as far as the Network sought to make heard the voiced experience of refugees, their participation and role in the process of the project was integral to those aspects of the project that have clearly been a success.

"The project has provided an excellent opportunity for me to see a partnership approach in action; to see refugee groups across different nations working towards shared goals. This is especially useful to me in my work as the UK is presently developing an Integration strategy for recognised refugees. Additionally the development of the new European Refugee Fund to individual member states means that we will in future be examining bids for Integration projects and allocating funds. Seeing this project in action has helped to inform such decision making". (Participating policy maker)

"The project has enabled me to think more deeply about some of the processes involved in successful integration, and the very real barriers to integration that exist for most refugees. Any opportunity to hear the voices of refugees themselves is valuable; indeed, giving more chances for refugees to make their voices heard helps to inform policies on integration". (Participating policy maker)

"I think the project has reinforced the idea that refugees themselves should have a key role to play in the development of integration policy. The problem is setting up structures and establishing channels of communication that genuinely empower refugees and enable their voices to be heard". (Participating policy maker)

"My aim was to involve refugees in the development and implementation of policy. As a result of this project I have discovered concrete ways of achieving this". (Participating policy maker)

"For many of the policy makers it was their first opportunity to dialogue openly and in such detail with people who could articulate from personal experience what the refugee experience is like". (Agency participant)

"Before the project I had my own definition and understanding of integration, but during the project having other people's points of view and experiences heard have significantly improved my personal understanding of integration and settlement". (Refugee participant)

"This process has given me a clear and good understanding of what integration and settlement mean. I was thinking the integration is the responsibility of refugees only because they are seeking settlement. I now know after many discussions that integration means it is a two way process which involves the refugees and the host country... It is only through refugees and local community residents interacting that mutual understanding can be achieved. We need to develop reciprocal links between refugees and the host population, which will highlight the positive contribution of refugees and the value of multiculturalism for society'. (Refugee participant)

"The meaning of integration for policy makers feels like they treat it like a switch. You turn it on and off when you like. I hope after they listened to refugees that they at least think in a different way about it." (Refugee participant)

"I feel more actively involved in the process by giving my voice and experience as a refugee living in the host country. I could be more actively involved by giving help and support to other refugees and to create awareness of refugee situations and issues." (Refugee participant)

"I think we have the answer to roles in our hands. Policy makers and agencies could read the work of this research project and see the important role of research projects like this one". (Refugee participant)

"As far as the project is concerned there are still things to be done to have some practical achievements. I believe this is how: since we found out that integration is a two way process and therefore involves many people and organisations from both refugee communities and government related agencies, one thing that can be done is to make sure that these communities and bodies from both sides are aware of our findings and practice them. This is a hell of a lot of work to do and requires a lot of effort and wish, but it can be done. Bringing the findings into practice instead of filing them – this is where we should be going next". (Refugee participant)

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For a copy of the Full Report (100 pages) and Process Evaluation Report (26 pages) please contact:

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