

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

REFUGEE AWARENESS SEMINAR

WELCOME INN HOTEL, CASTLEBAR

28 SEPTEMBER 2005

**Organised by: Mayo Intercultural Action, Citizen Information Service,
Louisburgh Community Project, Kiltimagh CDP**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Setting the Context	2
Opening Remarks – Donncha O Connell	5
Panel One - Why People Come Here / Reality on the Ground	5
<i>Chair: Donncha O Connell – Dean of the Faculty of Law, NUIG</i>	
Stephen O Brien - UNHCR	6
Betty Koinange - Asylum Seeker	6
Denis Gallagher - Garda Immigration Officer	7
Ruth Mc Neeley - Co-ordinator – Mayo Rape Crisis Centre	7
Thérèse Ruane - Chairperson of MIA	8
Questions and Answers	9
Panel Two – Rights and Entitlements	
<i>Chair: Triona Nic Giolla Choille – Galway Refugee Support Group</i>	10
Judy Irwin – Refugee Information Service	10
Martin Greaney – Community Welfare Service	11
JP Kelly – Asylum seeker	11
Pat Higgins – VEC	12
Linda Gilroy - Comhairle	12
Questions and Answers	13
Panel Three – Integration	
<i>Chair: Margaret Brehony - Irish Refugee Council</i>	14
Dr. Jean Pierre Eyanga - Integrating Ireland	14
Jim Power - Mayo County Childcare Committee	15
Declan Turnbull - Mayo County Development Board	16
Ndrek Gjini – Refugee	16
Closing Remarks – Donncha O Connell	17
Evaluation	18
General Feedback	18
Lessons for the Future	21
A Final Note ...	24

SETTING THE CONEXT

Irish society is an increasingly pluralistic one where ethnic and cultural differences are growing realities. The immigrant community in Ireland is largely made up of returning Irish emigrants and migrant workers, as well as asylum seekers and refugees. People from other countries and minority ethnic groups have been living in Mayo for a number of years now and are making a contribution economically, socially and culturally to the County of Mayo.

However, many face challenges and barriers to integration and are limited in their contribution to society by factors beyond their control. This is particularly the case for asylum seekers living both in the community and in direct provision accommodation centres in three towns in the county – Kiltimagh, Ballyhaunis and Charlestown. Asylum seekers are not entitled to work, which prevents people contributing economically and poses a further barrier to integration into the local community.

There are misconceptions about refugees and asylum seekers in the media, the workplace and in all areas of public life. It was to counteract negative representation and inaccurate information that a steering group was set up to organise an information seminar, *Dispelling the Myths*. The organisers were Mayo Intercultural Action (MIA) in conjunction with the Citizens Information Centre, Castlebar, Louisburgh Community Project, and Kiltimagh CDP. To facilitate maximum participation of refugees and asylum seekers in the seminar, transport, crèche facilities and lunch were provided.

The information seminar set the context and described the reality for refugees and asylum seekers living in Mayo. It provided an opportunity for service providers, community and voluntary groups, refugees and asylum seekers as well as concerned individuals to gain and to share information on issues affecting asylum-seekers and refugees in the county.

During the course of the day three panels focused on the following themes:

- Why people come here / the reality on the ground
- Rights, entitlements and accessing services
- Integration

Donncha O Connell, Dean of the Faculty of Law at NUIG and a leading human rights expert, chaired the event. Triona Nic Giolla Choille (Galway Refugee Support Group) and Margaret Brehony (Irish Refugee Council) chaired two of the panels.

There were contributions from the UNHCR, Integrating Ireland, Refugee Information Service, Mayo County Development Board, Mayo Rape Crisis Centre, Mayo Intercultural Action (MIA), An Garda Síochána, Mayo VEC, Comhairle, Mayo County Childcare Committee, Community Welfare Service, as well as refugees and asylum seekers living in direct provision hostels and in the community.

Feedback and evaluation from people who attended the event and participants on the panels are set out in the evaluation section of this report. They concur with the steering group's view that the objectives of the seminar *Dispelling the Myths* were met. The seminar aimed to:

- Promote greater understanding and awareness of issues affecting refugees and asylum seekers in Co. Mayo
- Create a forum for refugees, asylum seekers, statutory agencies, voluntary groups to share information and experiences
- Build on existing links between service providers and users and bring about the provision of more culturally appropriate and inclusive services in Co. Mayo
- Combat prejudice and racism by providing information and dispelling the myths regarding refugees and asylum seekers

The importance of organising seminars and information sessions such as *Dispelling the Myths* was reflected in the large number of people in attendance. More than 300 people attended the event representing a broad sector of statutory and community organisations, asylum seekers and refugees, concerned individuals. It is hoped that such a collaborative approach will build bridges and promote meaningful integration of refugees and asylum seekers and all minority ethnic groups in County Mayo.

The steering committee of ‘Dispelling the Myths’ would like to thank everyone for supporting the seminar and we hope that it was an informative event for all. In particular, we would like to thank the panellists for their valuable inputs, Triona Nic Giolla Choille and Margaret Brehony for chairing two of the panels. Of course Donncha O Connell deserves special mention for chairing the event and for sharing his insights and expertise on the day. We’d like to especially acknowledge the first-rate service provided by the childcare workers in the crèche and to the Welcome Inn Hotel for their help and co-operation. Of course this event would not have been possible without the support of its sponsors: Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform; Comhairle; Mayo County Childcare Committee; Health Service Executive; and Mayo County Council.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh go léir.

OPENING REMARKS

Donncha O Connell opened by stating that it was great to see new diverse communities in County Mayo and that it was not like that when he grew up in Mayo in the 1970s. He asked that there be a practical and constructive focus during the seminar and that questions be approached with a view to finding and proposing solutions. As a former campaigner, Donncha said that it was remarkable how issues have changed in the last fifteen years and that in the context of a significant reduction in numbers of people seeking asylum in this country, the government now had no excuse for not providing people with accommodation and better refugee protection. He stated that alternatives to asylum are not explored here in Ireland and that there was not enough attention given to leave to remain. Deportation is an emotive issue with massive implications for the people involved. Yet here in Ireland we deport eight times more people than we give leave to remain to. Donncha pointed to a positive development in government policy, the introduction of a regularisation process to deal with parents of Irish children, stating “*albeit imperfect, it is to be applauded.*” He said that integration was now critical, highlighting the fact that integration does not mean assimilation.

“The critical issue we must focus on is the issue of integration. This doesn’t mean assimilation. Our cultures can be enriched tremendously by integration and it is great to see the bottom-up approach in Mayo. It is a credit to the people in Mayo who are engaging in these activities. I congratulate Mayo Intercultural Action on such a good start in an important process”

PANEL ONE
WHY PEOPLE COME HERE / REALITY ON THE GROUND

Chair: Donncha O Connell

Stephen O Brien - UNHCR

Stephen O Brien defined what constitutes a refugee, highlighting the fact that refugees are forced to leave their country whereas other immigrants come here voluntarily to work or to study. He said that the distinction is very important as myths are based on confusion. Stephen pointed out Ireland's obligation under the Geneva Convention to provide refugee protection and said that refugees in Ireland today mainly come from Nigeria, Somalia, Romania, Sudan and Afghanistan. This profile is similar to elsewhere in Europe. Stephen highlighted the importance of integration.

Betty Koinange – Kenya / Ballyhaunis

Betty, an asylum seeker from Kenya, living in direct provision accommodation in Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo, described her experience as isolating and "*living in limbo*". She stressed that not having the right to work was a critical contributing factor to this isolation and to the inability of asylum seekers to integrate into the local community. As a result, "*we become eroded and dormant – by the time we get back to active life we are handicapped.*" Betty described the reality for asylum seekers, living in direct provision accommodation with little or no opportunities for social integration, as "*Wake up – eat - watch TV - sleep – wake up – eat...*"

Betty also identified many of the reasons why people come here to Ireland. "*Asylum seekers are persecuted in their own countries of origin for reasons of race, religion, political affiliations and for being members of certain social groups.*" She stressed that most refugees are women and that "*women are the glue that hold their families together but they come to Ireland because of gender violence, rape, FGM and the need to protect their children.*"

She stressed that when most refugees leave their countries of origin, their destination is not known and that they end up finding themselves in Ireland. She highlighted the fact that many asylum seekers are from privileged backgrounds and have paid substantial sums of money to leave their countries and she raises the question:

“If anyone was not in real trouble, would they spend so much money to come to this country and live in limbo, indefinitely in accommodation centres on 19.10 euros per week, not work ..?”

Denis Gallagher – Garda Immigration Officer

Denis stated that the first person an asylum seeker meets in this country is a member of An Garda Síochána, as a person must register with the Garda National Immigration Bureau on arrival in the country. He pointed to the tendency for An Garda Síochána to get bad publicity resulting from what are often isolated incidents and described the vast majority of Gardaí as humane and courteous in their manner. He stressed that the Gardaí do not determine refugee status, which is the role of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. There is a racial and intercultural section to An Garda Síochána and each of the 6 districts in Mayo has an ethnic liaison officer. He asked that people who may have problems or issues with the force to come forward and discuss those issues with them.

Ruth Mc Neely – Coordinator of Mayo Rape Crisis Centre

Ruth explained the work of Mayo Rape Crisis Centre, stressing the fact that the group has no legal expertise in relation to asylum or immigration but has many questions regarding how asylum seekers are being treated. In 2005, 10% of their client base was made up of asylum seeking women and asylum seekers have been accessing their service for four years. She stressed that they could never have envisaged the suffering they have seen in that time but she was compelled to tell it as it is. Mayo Rape Crisis Centre works with women who have experienced multiple rapes, all of them by more than one perpetrator, often by militia. Many have been tortured; some are suffering the effects of FGM. Many have had family members murdered and many are separated from their children. Ruth

described how a woman is forced to tell her story repeatedly to strangers from different agencies only to be told repeatedly that rape is not a valid reason for seeking asylum. Not only is a woman forced to relive the trauma over and over again in a hostile environment but must face rejection and an uncertain future as well.

The first woman that Mayo Rape Crisis centre worked with was granted refugee status; every woman since has been turned down. Their stories were deemed – *not credible*. She said that the Rape Crisis Centre is “*enlivened, energised, inspired*” through working with asylum seeking women.

Therese Ruane – Chairperson of Mayo Intercultural Action (MIA)

Therese gave an overview of *Mayo Intercultural Action*, stating that MIA is a county-based voluntary group, with a management committee consisting of refugees, asylum seekers and members of the local community. To date, MIA’s work has included: organising information sessions for asylum seekers in accommodation centres and in the community; art and music courses in hostels; training for committee members; developing links with agencies and organisations locally, regionally and nationally; development of a strategic plan and policies for the organisation. Mayo Intercultural Action strives to maximise the involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in the activities and management structure of the organisation. The group has identified the need to concentrate its efforts to secure funding to establish an office and employ a paid coordinator for the project.

Therese gave an overview of the situation for more than 200 asylum seekers living in direct provision accommodation in Ballyhaunis, Kiltimagh and Charlestown. She identified as some of the difficulties faced by people living in direct provision accommodation: limited public transport; lack of childcare facilities; lack of family supports; increasing institutionalisation; cramped conditions; unfamiliar food. She also stressed that the welfare of children living in these conditions was of particular concern.

For those asylum seekers who may eventually leave direct provision to live in the community, the transition is difficult. Accessing training, having their qualifications recognised, finding employment or accommodation, are just a few of the obstacles people face with little or no guidance or support. She stressed that many refugees and asylum seekers suffer from severe isolation and marginalisation. Indeed, Mayo Intercultural Action has called for a county-wide audit and needs analysis for refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants living and working in Mayo to map the situation in Mayo and to ensure that peoples' specific needs can be addressed.

Questions & Answers

Questions tended to centre on immigration policies and procedures. Donncha emphasised that no one is calling for an open door policy. He stressed that the state must face up to its responsibilities and take its obligations under the refugee convention seriously. He argued that there should be more leave to remain, more programme refugee systems in place for refugees from countries where there are particular difficulties. In response to the question regarding a 'one stop shop' for all immigrants, Donncha stressed that refugee protection is a separate issue to immigration policy. A query regarding the subject of the seminar was raised: why representatives from Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, etc were not on the panels. Thérèse explained that while migrant workers from the accession states and elsewhere, living and working in Mayo, may have similar experiences as refugees and asylum seekers they fall under a different category of immigrants. Thérèse explained that *Dispelling The Myths* was a refugee awareness seminar with a particular focus – refugee and asylum issues.

PANEL 2
RIGHTS AND ENTITLEMENTS, ACCESSING SERVICES

Chair: Triona Nic Giolla Choille

Triona is the Co-ordinator of Galway Refugee Support Group. As part of their work, they are constantly being challenged by the media to tackle myths and misunderstandings about the rights and entitlements of refugees and asylum seekers, pointing to the need to get accurate information out into the public domain. Triona identified the government policies of direct provision and the prohibition on the right to work as key contributing factors to the myths about asylum seekers and refugees and impede their integration into Irish society.

Judy Irwin – Refugee Information Service (RIS)

Judy gave an overview of the services RIS provides, the main issues that arise in clinics, and the difficulties that many refugees and asylum seekers have in accessing their services. This is particularly true for people living outside Galway and Judy stressed the need for asylum seekers, who are engaged in a complex legal process, to be near a legal and information service. Judy said that the RIS hopes to extend its service in the Mayo area. The main issues that arise in the clinics centre on: accommodation and direct provision; health; education and access to English language training for asylum seekers. Judy said direct provision accommodation was unsuited and that it was now almost impossible to move from direct provision to private rented accommodation. This has serious implications for people's health. She pointed to the fact that asylum seekers are not entitled to Integrating Ireland English language classes; these are confined to refugees and work permit holders and as a result, the teaching of English to asylum seekers is often left to voluntary endeavour.

Judy pointed to the fact that refugees are the only status holders with the right to family reunification for their spouses and children. Residents with Irish children, those granted leave to remain, work permit holders or accession state nationals are excluded.

Martin Greaney – Community Welfare Service

Martin gave an overview of the health and supplementary welfare entitlements for asylum seekers and refugees living in the community and in direct provision accommodation in Mayo. He said there is a Direct Provision allowance (€ 19.10 per adult / € 9.60 per child) stressing that his department “*don’t make policies – we implement.*” He identified some additional supports such as a weekly supplement for nappies for newborn babies; transport costs; € 130 – € 150 once off clothing allowance given when people arrive and a six-monthly basis thereafter; pram and buggy. He said they try to meet special needs as they arise under the exceptional needs provision of the Supplementary Act. However, he stated: “*I can dispel the myth. We do not pay for cars or mobile phones or any other exceptional payments – it doesn’t happen.*” Martin identified some of the problems they encounter, including limited public transport and language barriers. He said that there are 444 asylum seekers in County Mayo: 221 live in direct provision hostels and the remainder live in the community. In Kiltimagh, there are 32 families (39 adults / 40 children), in Ballyaunis, there are 48 families (69 adults / 56 children) and in Charlestown, there are 8 families (10 adults / 19 children). Martin welcomed the idea of a paid coordinator for MIA, stressing that an independent support group was something that should be pursued and supported.

JP Kelly – Cameroon / Ballyhaunis

JP has been living in direct provision accommodation for more than two years. He said that refugees are victims of inhumane societies and oppressive governments. He identified racism and isolation as key difficulties to be endured, emphasising that direct provision makes them even more vulnerable and isolated, and excluded from Irish society. He compared their plight to that of many Irish people who emigrated to other countries in the past and appealed to Irish people to remember their own historical experience of immigration:

“Irish people have climbed up that ladder to peace and happiness and all of us are at the bottom. And when reaching the top of the ladder, they draw the ladder so that we can’t get to the top too ... our fate is now in your hands”

JP pointed to economic indicators in the Irish economy, which has identified that more than 25,000 people are needed from outside the EU to work in this country. He questioned why asylum seekers are not given the opportunity to work considering the skills and professions they have.

Pat Higgins – Adult Education Officer with Mayo VEC

Pat presented an overview of VEC services in the county for all members of the community. He said that refugees have the same educational entitlements as Irish citizens. Regarding asylum seekers, he said that the VEC are prohibited from providing a course that suggests a right to employment. *“That is a regulation. I don’t make that regulation. I have to manage within it”*.

Pat pointed to the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI); asylum seekers have a right to this service. He said that they are providing some English language classes to asylum seekers under this initiative but that there are gaps in this service. He said that all they can do from now to December is *“to continue where commitments and expectations were raised and with a plan for new start ups.”* He identified the need for a service in Charlestown but said that this was not covered in their budgets for 2005.

He identified the need to provide a family literacy service and agreed to look at that in new budgets in January. He stressed that in the past the VEC could only deliver a service to adults, but that a change in regulation allows them to now deliver a family literacy service. He also pointed to the possibility of organising mixed groups under BTEI, integrating asylum seekers and other members of the local community.

Linda Gilroy - Comhairle

Linda gave an overview of Comhairle, what they do, and what they hope to achieve. She identified information as key to integration, stressing that Comhairle offer a free confidential, independent information and advice service. Comhairle have a three

pronged approach to providing information: Network of Citizen Information Centres (CIC), of which there are four in Mayo, and outreach services in smaller communities; CIC phone service, five days a week; and an information website at www.OASIS.gov

She pointed to some specific initiatives – postcards with all relevant information and the publication of an information booklet entitled ‘*Coming to live in Mayo*’.

Question & Answers

Questions centred on living conditions in direct provision accommodation centres; lack of childcare facilities; barriers to education, prohibition on the right to work for asylum seekers; lack of public transport.

Some specific questions and issues raised are outlined below:

- ❖ A doctor in Mayo General Hospital pointed to difficulties posed by asylum seekers who cannot make appointments on time due to the lack of availability of public transport.
- ❖ Childcare facilities were discussed. One woman pointed to her inability to pay for crèche facilities (25-40) euros per week, despite the fact that there were places in the local crèche.
- ❖ The fact that many teenagers are left in limbo after sitting the leaving certificate. Third level education is denied and there is no opportunity for young people to pursue further study, work or socialise / integrate in the local community.
- ❖ The onus on service providers to ensure services provision that is inclusive of all members of the community, regardless of ethnic, religious or cultural background. It is not enough to say that service providers are “*under regulation*” and surely there was an onus on people not solely to implement policy but to change the policies of their organisations to ensure inclusive and culturally appropriate service provision.
- ❖ Two questions were asked regarding living circumstances of asylum seekers:
 - *Why is accommodation not self-catering?*
 - *Why can asylum seekers not work?*

PANEL 3

INTEGRATION

Chair: Margaret Brehony

Margaret Brehony is an outreach worker with the Irish Refugee Council. She alluded to Betty's description, earlier in the seminar, of what it's like to live in direct provision accommodation, stating that it was a situation of social exclusion and poverty making integration impossible. She said that Ireland, in line with other EU countries, is preparing its third National Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, and pointed to the conflict between NAPS and state policy on asylum and direct provision, which in effect sets up barriers to integration and social inclusion. She said that this presents many obstacles and challenges to local government in trying to roll out anti-poverty and social inclusion policies, which allow for participation by asylum seekers in Irish society. While NAPS and the National Action Plan Against Racism calls for consistency and linkages across all relevant areas of government policy, Margaret pointed to the lack of interagency, interdepartmental linkages to create policies, consistent with the overall aim and spirit of integration in a culturally diverse Ireland.

Dr. Jean Pierre Eyanga - Integrating Ireland (Project Officer)

Jean Pierre Eyanga highlighted the importance of language learning, access to education and the right to work as key factors to integration. He stated that there was “no coherent integration policy in Ireland” and warned of the lost opportunity if successful integration does not take place. Jean Pierre said that Irish integration needs leadership at the highest level to ensure a co-ordinated, strategic approach and identified three strands to this process:

- Coherent integration policy
- Initiatives to strengthen and promote integration
- Protection of integration – legal instruments to facilitate this

On the subject of mainstreaming, Jean Pierre stressed its importance, as everyone needs to be a part of society. However, he pointed to the extraordinary and difficult situations that asylum seekers and refugees find themselves in, stressing that many are victims of violence, have lost parents and families, etc. As a result, their specific needs need to be met.

Jean Pierre said that administrators and service providers are not merely policy implementers and servants. He stressed that they play a crucial role in decision-making by feeding back information to hierarchies within their organisations and advised them to “*keep knocking on the door.*”

Jim Power – Mayo County Childcare Manager

Jim Power gave an overview of the role and the work of Mayo County Childcare Committee, which was set up in 2001 to co-ordinate childcare in Mayo. He outlined the Equal Opportunity Childcare Programme (EOCP), the first major childcare funding programme in the history of the state. Following the current programme, 2000–2006, it is expected that a new childcare programme will be rolled out. Jim explained that one of the issues regarding this funding is that it was originally established to meet the childcare needs of working parents. This restriction causes obvious difficulties for minority groups and asylum seekers who are not permitted to work. Jim stated that while this is the case now it is his expectation that this restriction will be lifted in the near future and that he looks forward to working with Asylum Seeker groups and other relevant agencies in addressing their childcare needs.

Jim identified a number of initiatives that the committee are delivering relevant to asylum seekers and refugees in County Mayo. Firstly, an anti-bias training programme for childcare workers. He also pointed to research into the childcare needs of asylum seekers and refugees in the county that Mayo County Childcare Committee is planning to carry out in the New Year.

Declan Turnbull - Mayo County Development Board

Declan said that the County Development Board will be developing a new 3-year Implementation Plan (2006 - 2008) and that an input from Mayo Intercultural Action would be very welcome. One of the roles of the County Development Board was to feed back to central Government the lack of local services in the County or where better co-ordination was required. He stressed the importance of inter-agency co-operation, stating that it was not a new concept but that it can take time to show results.

He pointed to the existence of the Mayo Equal Status Group, which organised a photographic exhibition on the nine grounds of discrimination under the Equal Status Act. This Exhibition toured many venues throughout the County and was successful in highlighting the various forms of discrimination that can exist.

Ndrek Gjini – Albania / Castlebar

Ndrek Gjini apologised for his English language skills and said that there was little point in his addressing the gathering in Albanian, as “*my English is better than your Albanian.*” Ndrek stressed the need to maintain one’s own culture while integrating fully into Irish society. He identified a number of issues that needed to be addressed to promote integration. Firstly, Ndrek pointed to the need for increased English language training, highlighting the fact that the current provision was inadequate. He also highlighted the difficulties that arise regarding the recognition of educational qualifications of refugees.

Closing Remarks – Donncha O Connell

Donncha began by addressing strategic questions to be considered by *Mayo Intercultural Action* regarding the focus and future direction of the organisation. Does MIA:

- Try to help to make life better on an individual basis?
- Campaign and lobby for change in a systematic way?
- Do both the above?

Donncha warned that a real challenge for MIA was survival and welcomed the prospect of a paid co-ordinator for MIA. However, he warned that the funding source for this project must protect MIA's independence to ensure that the organisation has a strategic position in its demand for change. He also stressed that the integrity evident at the seminar must be held onto and maintained.

In response to *service providers* and the difficulties and barriers they faced in providing inclusive and culturally appropriate services, he pointed to the frustration of implementing policies in a new context that was evident at the seminar. He highlighted the role of professional associations and trade unions in this process and suggested that perhaps the role of the ombudsman should be extended to this arena in the future.

Donncha stated that intervention and leadership is needed to combat racism in Irish society and that in a modern day Ireland, the concept of 'Irishness' needs to be explored in an open way, taking into consideration its complexities. He highlighted the importance of solidarity between groups, to prevent isolation of minority groups, stressing that isolation is a barrier to integration. Donncha stressed that diversity doesn't have to be compromised by integration and when we argue for integration, we are not arguing for assimilation. He pointed to the fact that we, in Ireland, have come late to this process and that we can learn from the mistakes of others and he stressed the cost and lost opportunity if meaningful integration does not take place.

EVALUATION

Evaluation was sought in two ways: evaluation sheets were distributed at registration at the seminar and people's impressions were also sought orally and recorded.

General Feedback

Feedback from the seminar was very positive. Service providers, community groups, asylum seekers and refugees stressed the value and importance of holding such an event and pointed to the difficulties they had encountered in accessing information regarding refugees and asylum seekers. Donncha O Connell expressed the view that '*Dispelling the Myths*' was one of the best seminars he had attended and that it achieved the right balance between information giving and participation of refugees and asylum seekers, something that other fora, in his opinion, often tend to neglect. This was a view that others concurred with:

The fact that members of the target population were both present and also participated in the day through the panel added hugely to the experience of the day. It is very rare at such conferences to have members of the asylum seeking and refugee communities present. Many organisations in this area talk about integration and inclusion of the asylum seeking and refugee communities but forget to include them in information days and seminars. I also think that the panel and question and answer sessions worked extremely well and gave a good balance of information overall with everyone being given the opportunity to speak

(Triona Nic Giolla Choille, GRSG)

I found the talks from other services very useful but also questions from the floor. The numbers present coupled with such interest and enthusiasm from the audience created a stimulating and thought provoking response from those present

(Judy Irwin, RIS)

Well-organised and very well attended, which served its purpose to raise awareness of the issues relating to asylum seekers

(Service Provider)

A worthwhile event. The whole thing seemed to work. It was not a matter of 'preaching to the converted', people were there to learn

(Service Provider)

Well done! This is what's needed – more days like this to make sure that accurate information is out there about refugees and asylum seekers. There are too many myths and the general public doesn't know the difficulties and the realities for 99% of the refugee population (Garda Immigration Officer)

The majority of people commented on the valuable inputs and participation of asylum seekers and refugees: both on the panels and from those attending the event. Their contributions were highlighted as of particular interest and value:

The input from asylum seekers and refugees was effective as it adds to the reality of the circumstances. Excellent panels (Service Provider)

I think most people were very interested and found the day informative. Many people stated that they appreciated hearing asylum seekers speak about their experiences
(Organiser)

Listening to personal life stories. Personal testimonies from refugees/asylum seekers was really beneficial
(Individual)

Presentations from refugees/asylum seekers – the policies in practice! (Service Provider)

Interestingly, asylum seekers commented on the fact that their experiences and stories were given a public platform, a new experience for them. This demonstrates the lack of representation of asylum seekers and refugees in the community, which contributes greatly to their isolation and marginalisation:

The day was marvellous because we were able to express our oppressions and to know that Irish people sympathise with us (Asylum seeker)

The day was successful because the problems faced by asylum seekers was really exposed and people saw why integration is a problem. The day brought more enlightenment
(Asylum seeker)

How the speakers representing asylum seekers was able to put across the plight of asylum seekers in Ireland (Asylum seeker)

The Kenyan woman actually talked about the actual reasons why people come to Ireland and what asylum seekers are facing and the reason why they are unable to integrate
(Asylum seeker)

The whole event worked well for it gave me a little hope that at least there are people out there thinking of how to assist asylum seekers in Ireland (Asylum seeker)

The importance of access to accurate information was highlighted and the consensus was that the information provided at the seminar was relevant, useful and accurate.

Clarification regarding the difference between AS and refugees and the needs of each
(Service Provider)

Panel One – helped to understand why people come here from Betty and JP
(Service Provider)

Short focussed presentations; Inputs from the various agencies; Large interested audience; Good stimulating chairperson who summarised discussions well and raised useful issues (Triona Nic Giolla Choille, GRSG)

Broad representatives from different relevant organisations – a lot of information on what is available (Service Provider)

I am unable to find any flaws with the day as I found it to be an excellent learning experience for both service providers and asylum seekers and refugees alike
(Judy Irwin, RIS)

Interestingly, a number of service providers pointed to their sense of isolation and the lack of awareness that others were experiencing the same issues:

To discover that every area in Mayo is experiencing the same problems and barriers regarding service provision for asylum seekers and the opportunity to voice that concern
(Service Provider)

Lessons for the Future

A number of suggestions regarding the organisation of future seminars or events were put forward. Firstly, many people pointed to the need for better time management of the seminar, which started a half an hour late as the buses from the accommodation centres had not arrived.

Inevitably there was an issue about time – not enough of it! – For discussion (Panelist)

*The only problem I was aware of was running overtime and people had to leave for work in the afternoon. Not enough chance for informal exchange between participants
(Service Provider)*

Because of the late start, not enough time for questions and answers (Service Provider)

Two people raised the issue of integration and the need to build bridges and relationships between asylum seekers, refugees and the local community.

*Keep up the good work! Is there a greater need to focus on integration issues?
(Individual)*

*It was a pity that the asylum seekers who had travelled to the conference by bus had to rush off afterwards instead of taking time to enjoy the good food and socialise
(Service Provider)*

I think it would be good to have occasional events that bring together people from different backgrounds - a bit of fun, culture and so on (Organiser)

Get personal, do things to bring people together personally, face each other, dispel the myths! Hope you don't see me as negative, don't mean that. Important to get to the real questions! Which are at the human level. Get personal! (Individual)

For them, as for myself, the direct human personal content might have meant more than the necessary contributions from people who are paid to work in the area, some with more passion, energy and conviction than others. Well done, thanks (Individual)

Actually, there was nothing new. What we want to hear is better things that will improve the life of asylum seekers (Asylum seeker)

I found it 'really' tiring but really well meaning ... so many agencies, empty speeches, advertising of their services, hardly anyone really saying anything meaningful (Individual)

However, it's important to emphasise that the aim of this seminar was to provide information, set the context and build awareness regarding the issues regarding refugee and asylum issues in Mayo. While further work needs to follow which would focus on the issue of integration and promoting better relations between asylum seekers, refugees and the local communities, this seminar provides the foundation or building block for a series of other events and initiatives to promote meaningful integration.

A number of people expressed the view that there were too many speakers and that it was too ambitious to cover all the topics in one morning. While this may be the case, the seminar aimed to provide an overview of refugee and asylum issues with particular reference to the reality on the ground in County Mayo.

A number of service providers identified the need to feed back the issues on the ground to policy makers to improve the situation on the ground for refugees and asylum seekers as well as people working with, and providing services in the County. This issue was identified in a question and answer session at the seminar, as a key priority and any positive developments would be crucial in improving the situation.

Most of the major problems identified related to national decisions. Feedback at all levels is very important (Service Provider)

That we have a considerable amount of work and effort to put into influencing national policy regarding asylum seekers (Service Provider)

Interestingly, two organisations working with refugees highlighted some of the direct benefits arising out of the seminar. Indeed, they expressed their increased motivation to work to improve the plight of refugees and asylum seekers as a direct result of the seminar.

The session worked really well and I think had a direct benefit/outcome at the Western Alliance Meeting in Ballyhaunis when asylum seekers dominated (in the best sense of the

word) the discussions on issues facing them in Direct Provision. This has had the result of motivating the rest of us to get moving on raising the issues about Direct Provision and logging and monitoring complaints

Another benefit came up today in discussions in Galway when workers from HSE were asking why we couldn't have a similar event in Galway! Some people who attended the session in Castlebar were advocating VERY strongly for a similar session here
(Triona Nic Giolla Choille, GRSG)

I found it to be an excellent seminar and came away from it highly motivated to achieve more for the target population in Mayo (Judy Irwin, RIS)

Finally, a number of asylum seekers and refugees expressed their hope and belief that future developments and initiatives in Mayo in relation to refugees and asylum seekers would improve service provision, create greater opportunities and improve the living circumstances of refugees and asylum seekers in Mayo.

Educational background and where it heads in the west. My hostel in Charlestown doesn't have the facility but at least I heard it in the plan for future (Asylum seeker)

I hope all the recommendations made would be looked into (Asylum seeker)

It was a brilliant idea, and I expect more of such events in the future (Refugee)

I believe there should be progress with the little that was said. Since few of the people that matters were on the high table, I believe they'll do something (Asylum seeker)

Let's start the progress now and start the process of meaningful integration now to ensure a more inclusive, enriched and diverse Mayo.

A FINAL NOTE ...

Mayo Intercultural Action has secured funding from Mayo County Council and the Department of Social and Family Affairs to carry out a countywide audit and needs analysis of asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants. This will begin in January 2006 and will be published in the autumn of 2006. This audit will provide a profile of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants living in County Mayo and will identify their specific needs in relation to health, education, employment, childcare, accommodation, religion, language and interpretation facilities. It will examine to what extent service providers and other agencies are addressing the needs and concerns of these new populations and will inform / direct future actions and initiatives by both statutory and voluntary agencies in the county in meeting those articulated needs. This audit will act as a vital tool for building a more inclusive society and thus promoting the economic, social and cultural development of County Mayo.

"... the more people who are on the margins the weaker is the centre...we all have a stake in building a future which respects and celebrates diversity - a generous, sharing Ireland that encompasses many traditions and cultures and creates space for all its people."

President Mary Mc Aleese, 24 Feb 2000

"It is not possible to walk through a door that is locked and the door to integration in Ireland is locked."

Ms Hope Hanlan, UNHCR 23 March 2000