INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP
IN 21st CENTURY IRELAND

What Prospects for the African Immigrant Community?

A research initiative commissioned by the Africa Centre
on the Civic Participation of the African Community in Ireland

Conducted by Theophilus Ejorh
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In Ireland the participation of ethnic minority communities in civic life has remained a heavily under-explored area of empirical study and also, until recently, an issue attracting little institutional and organizational attention. This research, conceived by the Africa Centre Ireland, therefore, makes valuable contributions to current conversations on the participation of immigrants and ethnic minorities in Irish civic society.

The survey was provoked by the necessity to demonstrate that the growing immigrant communities in Ireland can participate actively in various aspects of civic life if they have better opportunities, acquire a voice and can generate spaces for greater engagements in society. The principal goal of the project was to increase the civic awareness of both African and other immigrant communities and to suggest ways for better and more inclusive institutional policy decisions and improved organizational competence.

While the results of the study show that a good number of African immigrants are involved in various civic activities in their local communities and in faith-based and voluntary initiatives, a sizeable number of respondents, for several reasons, showed little or no interest in political activities. The findings also highlight a number of factors that scuttle healthy and dynamic civic involvements by immigrants and ethnic minorities in Ireland. Some of these problems include racism and intolerance, absence of a proper social inclusion framework, inadequate information about civic values/a lack of civic education programmes, language difficulty, and restrictions/sense of insecurity resulting from the problem of naturalization and regularization of residency.

Finally, some important recommendations have been made based on the findings and suggestions by the interviewees themselves They include: the formulation of more positive measures to tackle racism and intolerance and promote social inclusion; expansion of political opportunities for marginalized communities; greater state responsibility in fashioning an inclusive civic participation programme; the establishment of a national consultative forum for the immigrant/ethnic minority community; a review of current naturalization and residency policies; and the creation of more opportunities for language training for immigrants/ethnic minorities.

Ms. Neltah Chadamoyo
Chairperson

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The Idea for a Civic Participation Survey

The idea to conduct a survey on the participation of African immigrants in Irish civic society was inspired by a strong feeling among members of Africa Centre who deemed it a necessity for the growing immigrant communities in Ireland to acquire a voice and generate spaces for greater participation in Irish society. Until 1990s, the population of the immigrant community was relatively insignificant, but as the years rolled by, realities showed that in-migration was becoming a permanent characteristic of a new Irish society, as immigrant populations underwent an upward swing.

While these states of affairs stimulated institutional and academic interests and discourses on the social transformations unfolding within the Irish landscape, greater interests and research initiatives were focused largely on issues like integration, social inclusion, services provisions and needs of ethnic minorities and new immigrant communities. Less attention was paid to the burning issue of how these marginalized groups could be integrated through active civic participation in their adopted society, a tendency that has been blamed on the unwillingness of Irish people to accept the reality of in-migration occurring in their country.[1]

These developments markedly led up to the founding of the Africa Centre[2] in 2001. Becoming a leading and broad-based African-led voluntary organization, the Centre wished to demonstrate through this civic participation research that active involvement of immigrants and ethnic minorities is an integral part of and also germane to integration processes in Ireland. Accordingly, this project is a follow-up on two reports on the participation of immigrants in Irish electoral process, earlier produced by the Centre, titled *Positive Politics* (Fanning, Mutwarasibo and Chadamoyo, 2003) and *Negative Politics: Positive Vision* (Fanning, Mutwarasibo and Chadamoyo, 2004).

Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the objectives/goals of this civic participation project are to serve as a potential tool for promoting new ideas, fresh perspectives and new visions; advancing the growth of the democratic process; stimulating political accountability and dynamic citizenship; promoting intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation; as well as making valuable contributions towards better ways of improving institutional and intercultural practices. In this way, it is hoped also that this project would contribute to the current discourses on the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities into Irish society by raising the awareness of these groups about the importance of getting actively involved in Irish civic life.

The Africa Centre views immigrants and ethnic minorities in Ireland as marginalized communities whose integration concerns are currently dominated and driven by indigenous community-led organizations and groups. This system of things was the primary motivation in commissioning this project as a way of mobilizing African immigrants and also, in some way, influencing other immigrant groups to effectively address the social, cultural and institutional contexts that adversely affect their participation in Irish civic society. Fundamentally, it is intended that this project would strengthen the grassroots mobilization that is currently underway.

This project is also crucial and timely now that Ireland and other EU member states have become increasingly worried about the plummeting level of citizens' participation in civic activities, especially the dipping of citizens' involvements in political processes, which has thus inspired actions to set up frameworks for active citizenship in EU countries.

1. For useful commentary on this issue, see Feldman, Ndakengerwa, Nolan and Frese (2005) report.
2. This is the only large-scale study of the development of immigrant-led civic organizations in Ireland. See also Ugba (2005)

RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The Africa Centre commissioned this project, among other things, to:

- Determine the civic situation of the African immigrant community in Ireland.

- Determine how African immigrants in Ireland understand the concept and practice of civic engagements.

- Determine how African immigrants participate in civic activities and their level of involvements.

- Determine the difficulties and challenges African immigrants face in civic practices and how they would like the problem to be addressed.

The overriding intent of the study is, therefore, to create greater civic awareness among members of the African community about their new adopted society, and as a result, to engender better integration of Africans into Irish society.

Significantly, it is hoped that the report resulting from this survey would contribute to positive policy changes that would give both African and other immigrant communities greater voice, expanded spaces, increased opportunities for relevance, greater representation in Irish society and an overall improvement in their circumstances.

Moreover, this project is a call on Irish political institutions and leadership to address institutional and social barriers that impede the potential for greater participation of immigrant and ethnic minority communities in Irish civic society.

Some Expositions on Civic Participation

2.1 DEFINING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Civic participation is a term subject to diverse understandings. Selman (1991) uses the term to indicate how individuals "share a common space, common resources, common opportunities and manage interdependence" within the public sphere (quoted in Frideres, n.d., p.2). Frideres itemizes instances of civic involvement as including family discussions of government policies, peer group discussions of contestants in elections, canvassing for public support for a local charity, participating in protest activities, running for a public office, partaking in a referendum, lobbying, campaigning for a contestant for a political office, etc. But contemporary debates on the concept (which is not within the scope of this research) go beyond these.

Against the backdrop of the evolving circumstances of new immigrant communities, the traditional notion of civic participation is one that hangs upon the idea of exclusion and perpetuates a politics of discrimination[3]. The liberal approach, for instance, considers civic participation largely as concerning the rights of juridical[4] citizens and their commitment to and involvement in all aspects of national life[5]. In the conventional and juridical sense, citizenship is confined to the act of holding a country's passport. Raftery[6] describes this as insufficient since it ignores the participation of large numbers of people categorized as 'non-citizens' in what alternative and populist approaches have described as 'inclusive citizenship'[7]. This corroborates Cornwall's critique of the liberal model of participation for failing to recognize the potential and commitment of non-passport holding individuals and members of marginalized communities. According to him, the exclusion of some individuals from existing spaces hinders their involvements from societal activities. However, he notes that demands from ordinary members of society for "recognition and voice" have brought about the creation "of spaces into which publics of various kinds are united"[8].

3. Formerly, Africa Solidarity Centre.
4. Rahnema (1992).
5. That is, officially granted or legally recognized by the state. Cornwall (2002).
6. See The Irish Times (25 April 2005); also Cornwall (2002).

2.2 A GLIMPSE AT CURRENT CIVIC SITUATIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

There is a current effort by European Union countries to promote civic consciousness among their citizens. The European Commission, for instance, adopted a proposal in April 2005 to launch a five-year plan that aims to promote European citizenship within the Union. Labelled 'Citizens for Europe', the EU commissioner Ján Figel stressed that this programme would help EU citizens to "develop a sense of belonging and forge a European identity" (The European Commission in Ireland, 7 April 2005). At the heart of the new programme is a vision to create opportunities for EU citizens to "fully assume responsibility" through active participation "in the construction of Europe"[9]. Among others, the programme would encourage EU citizens to be directly involved in EU activities through initiatives like town-twinning, citizen projects, civil society organizations, information, etc. It is on the basis of these developments that Ireland and some other EU countries have begun a move to introduce active citizenship programmes for the purpose of building a vibrant civic society.

Similarly, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has stressed that EU governments have a primary role to play in the construction of a dynamic civic society[10]. It has argued that in order to achieve maximum benefit from an active citizenship life and a strong civic society, EU governments should consider fulfilling the following roles: "facilitate access to information and participation"; introduce public awareness programmes and civic education initiatives and "support capacity building" among third sector organizations[11].
In Scotland, the authorities have completed plans to introduce civic education as part of the curricula in early years centres, primary and secondary schools, and the programme is intended to prepare and equip Scottish youth with necessary knowledge and

7. Hickey and Mohan (2004); Gaventa (2004).
8. Ibid Cornwall, p. 50.
9. The European Commission in Ireland (7 April 2005).
10. Mentioned by O'Ferrall, Irish Times (25 April 2005).
11. Ibid.

skills to become "responsible individuals who will work towards a more inclusive society both in a social and political sense"[12]. In England, similar initiatives have also been introduced. In English schools, for instance, citizenship classes were introduced in 2002. These classes provided an opportunity for the pupils to learn about the operations of their political system. In addition, the children are taught how to acquire communication skills and to participate responsibly in society[13].

The above scenarios highlight two central issues. Firstly, they reveal flagging interests in civic life among sections of society, particularly the youth. Secondly, they call for a creation of specific capacity building measures necessary for certain groups of people in society such as immigrants and new ethnic communities to engage actively in civic society.

Antonio Vitorino, the European Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs, offered his views on some of these vital issues. In a statement on the need for the integration of migrants into EU societies, he delineated a number of barriers like racism, insufficient knowledge of the language of the host country and a lack of access to education and training[14], which immigrants in EU countries face in efforts to integrate and participate actively in civic society. To address this problem, Vitorino stressed the need for immigrants and ethnic minorities in the EU to receive civic education.

These situations pose an enormous challenge for EU governments, who formulate policies on immigration that reflect neoliberal values and which are devoid of a human face[15]. According to Gilmore (2004), there is a certain tendency by EU countries to treat immigrants as units of labour rather than as individuals with "connected up families" and "connected up communities" that have come to settle in EU countries, and for these reasons these countries do not take the issue of integration of immigrants and their participation in civic society seriously.

Until recently, many western European countries had ignored the issue of immigrant participation in civic life because they assumed that "immigration was a temporary phenomenon" (Bousetta, Gsir and Jacobs 2005). An examination of the policies of some EU countries towards immigrants' participation in active civic life, such as political participation, shows a certain contradiction. While some EU governments tend to create more opportunities for political engagements for immigrants, others have tightened measures and erected intimidating fortresses to limit immigrant participation.

Bousetta (2005) outlines four distinct groups of EU countries with specific frameworks for electoral participation. The first category includes countries like France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Greece, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia, Malta and Poland. These countries allow only EU citizens to participate in local and European parliamentary elections, while only their citizens can participate in regional and national elections. In fact, in Germany and Austria, it is unconstitutional for non-EU citizens to participate in any elections. The second category includes countries such as Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Luxemburg, Belgium, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia. In these countries, while both EU and non-EU citizens can take part in local elections, only EU nationals can participate in EU parliamentary elections. However, Denmark, Sweden and Hungary are exceptional cases, as it is only in these three countries that EU and non-EU citizens are permitted to participate in provincial elections. Ireland and the UK, according to Bousetta's categorization, belong to the third group. In the UK, EU and Commonwealth citizens can participate in local, provincial and European parliamentary elections, as only Commonwealth citizens can participate in regional and national elections. As for Ireland, while EU, Commonwealth and non-EU citizens can participate in local elections; only EU and commonwealth citizens can participate in national elections. However, this assertion about Ireland may be contested, as immigrants from Commonwealth countries that were not naturalized Irish citizens were not allowed to participate in the last Irish national and EU parliamentary elections.

12. Quoted in Stewart (2005).
13. Ibid.
14. European Report (July 2004).
15. Gilmore (2004).

Following Bousetta's classification, two countries, Spain and Portugal, belong to the fourth category. In Spain, only EU and Norwegian citizens can participate in local elections, while the EU parliamentary elections are the exclusive domain of EU citizens. As for Portugal, EU and citizens from countries such as Argentina, Chile, Estonia, Israel, Norway, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela can participate in local elections, while as in the case of most other EU countries only EU citizens are legally qualified to participate in EU parliamentary elections. Bousetta notes that "for very specific status on the basis of reciprocity", citizens of other countries resident in Portugal may participate in Portuguese national elections.

2.3 IMMIGRANTS AND IRISH CIVIC SITUATION

In Ireland, there is a paucity of research material on civic participation as well as a lack of a dynamic civic participation programme. Ugba (2005) confirms this in his recent report on the civic engagement of immigrants in Irish society. He notes that Irish authorities until very recently were never keen to address the "legal and institutional" matters affecting the participation of immigrants in civic life largely because Ireland did not want to "promote itself as a migration destination"[16]. But he observes that despite this poor civic situation, immigrants "have been active in many facets of civic engagements, even in the days of low in-migration"[17]. He challenges a current ascription of rising civic activism among immigrants to "the dramatic increases" in immigrant populations. For him, other factors such as "increased mobilization", education and "the specific immigration experiences of particular groups" are rather responsible for the current upsurge in civic activism among Ireland's immigrant communities[18]. Ugba states pointedly: "Many immigrants are engaged in civic activism because they want to effect a change, challenge a law or policy they considered unjust, attract social and material support for self-development or simply out of boredom"[19]. These views somewhat corroborate those of Cornwall and Gaventa who have suggested that minority groups mobilize and create their own spaces for engagement because of the difficulty they face in their desire to participate in mainstream spaces[20].

Another study entitled *Development and Critical Interculturalism* (2002)[21] reinforces these views. In this study, the authors note that in Ireland most members of the new communities "feel excluded and alienated" from participation in society, despite their willingness to get involved. They confirm a current norm in the country to over-involve a particular emergent elitist group within the new communities in various development "forums and activities", an unpopular practice that stirs disillusionment among the excluded majority of immigrants[22].

A recent study by Feldman, Ndakengerwa, Nolan and Frese (2005) takes a look at how immigrant and minority ethnic-led community and voluntary organizations are developing within the civil society sector and the challenges they face in terms of their roles to bring about positive change in the immigrant/ethnic minority situation in Ireland, North and South. The authors stress the centrality of civil society activity in providing the means 'to bring about the conditions necessary for these 'new' communities to thrive as national minorities rather than temporary visitors, and in the process take up their roles and responsibilities as contributors to society' (ibid, p.10). Also highlighted are the 'intercultural contributions' that immigrant/minority ethnic led organizations have made in Irish civil society practices, through their activities and interactions with majority actors and stakeholders in the sector.

In his own writing, Gilmore (2004) acknowledges a certain poor attitude towards immigrants and ethnic minorities in Ireland when he describes the country's official approach towards immigrants as market-based, an attitude that mirrors the situation in the rest of the EU. In his study on the role of NGOs and development projects in the integration of new communities in Dublin's North East Inner City, Ejorh (2004) confirms Gilmore's views, as his findings

16. Ibid Ugba (2005), p.25.
17. Ibid, p.6
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Cornwall (2002) and Gaventa (2004).
21. Feldman, Frese and Yousif (2002).
22. Ibid Gilmore, p.4.

reveal an absence of a dynamic policy of integration and participation of immigrants in Irish society. The study shows that many immigrants in the area are not keen in taking part in the affairs of the local community for reasons of racism, xenophobia, misrepresentations and intolerance prevalent in the area. The study also shows that some ethnic minorities feel excluded from the activities of civil society organizations, in addition to their experiences of physical and social alienation in the area. These and other issues like family reunification, residency and citizenship, according to the study, "pose a potential obstacle "to the integration of immigrants and their participation in civic society[23].

All this said, the question to address is, how can marginalized and excluded groups, such as Ireland's immigrant communities and ethnic minorities, become more represented in new forms of civic engagements? Fanning, Mutwarasibo and Chadamoyo deal with some of these issues in *Positive Politics* (2003) and *Negative Politics: Positive Vision* (2004). Although the studies do not deal with other kinds of civic engagements, they address very fundamental issues in relation to the participation of new communities and ethnic minorities in Irish political processes. In *Positive Politics,* the authors note that the political parties that were surveyed had no definite measures to encourage immigrant and ethnic minority inclusion in party membership. This situation is perhaps explained by the Western propensity to exclude and marginalize immigrants and ethnic minorities from politics, the authors observe[24]. This system of things, according to them, has potential grave consequences. Fundamentally, the exclusion of immigrants and ethnic minorities "from mainstream politics", they contend, is capable of racializing politics as well as deepening social exclusion on the ground of ethnicity. Again, the absence of diversity in party membership and candidature in elections would make the political parties unable to tackle the issue of racism in the country. The authors consider manifestations of racism in Irish politics an extension and a reflection of racism in wider Irish society, noting that a lack of diversity in Irish politics would make the political parties unable to play a leadership role in contemporary multicultural Ireland[25].

Nevertheless, these negative political realities could be transformed into a positive vision, if certain measures are adopted. In *Negative Politics: Positive Vision* the authors spell out some of these measures, which include: the elimination of unnecessary administrative bottlenecks that limit immigrant and ethnic minority voting right; the inclusion of immigrants and ethnic minorities as party members and candidates for elections; a review of the current policies on citizenship, residency and deportation that limit the participation of immigrants in political processes; the formulation of a more dynamic integration policy that would provide for a shorter waiting period of naturalization; the establishment of a national consultative forum where issues affecting immigrants and ethnic minorities could be debated[26]; and finally, the development of "mentoring schemes" by the political parties to groom potential candidates from the new immigrant communities and ethnic minority groups[27]. Moreover, the authors recognize the role of community groups and activists to promote immigrant and ethnic minority participation in Irish politics, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of awareness and education for "greater representation of minority groups in politics" in Ireland[28].

On the other hand, recent developments suggest that Ireland is perhaps beginning to pay attention to its poor civic situation. This fact is borne out by the current move to set up a task force to advise the Irish government on how to develop and maintain "a culture of active citizenship" that would counteract the declining turnouts in elections in the country, brought about by growing apathy and even feelings of alienation among the populations[29]. O'Ferrall (2005) stresses that if Ireland desires to build a vibrant civic society, it must create high "standards of civic morality and civility"; it must establish a civic culture whereby citizens can fully engage in "democratic processes" in all spheres of society; and also create a situation where all

23. Ejorh (2004), pp.94-96.
24. Fanning Mutwarasibo and Chadamoyo (2003); see also Gilmore (2004).
25. Ibid.
26. Fanning Mutwarasibo and Chadamoyo (2004).
27. Fanning Mutwarasibo and Chadamoyo (2003, p.8).
28. Ibid, p.19.
29. See O'Ferrall, The Irish Times (25 April 2005).

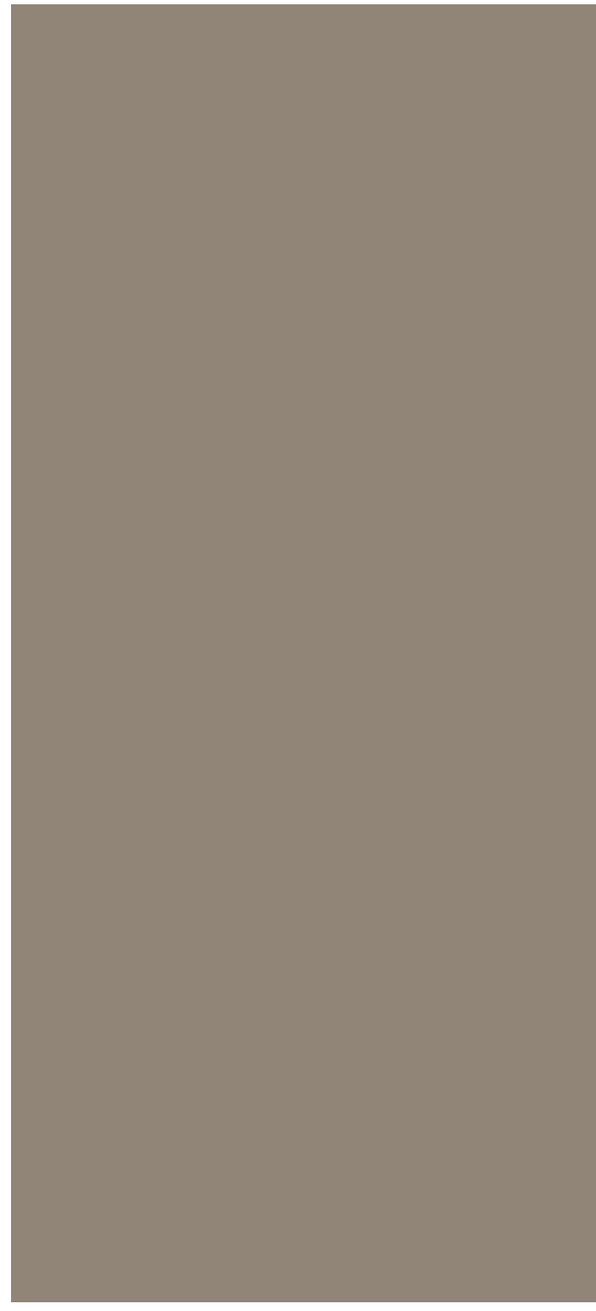
stakeholders in society can collaborate and interact for the collective good. Similarly, a situation must be created to enable family life and values, communal interests and "personal lifestyles" to achieve a balance; viable frameworks must be set up for effective information dissemination, consultation and public participation "in policy-making and public services"; while opportunities are to be provided for citizens' active participation in their local communities and neighborhoods[30].

2.4 CONCLUSION

This section has examined a number of key issues in relation to understandings and practices of civic participation. Ultimately, participation in civic life has always been characterized by a politics of exclusion and marginalization of different groups of minorities. Institutional and structural measures in human societies also have always been formulated and perpetuated to hinder active minority participation in social, political, economic and cultural processes in society. Similarly, there is a traditionally exclusionary tendency within human society to link civic participation to the legal sense of citizenship, an attitude that inevitably shuts out individuals categorized as 'non-citizens' from participation in civic life or fails to acknowledge their involvement in the affairs of their society or their contributions to the common good.

Very importantly, the literature also reveals current substantial efforts by immigrant and ethnic minority groups to articulate their voice through the creation of their own 'organic spaces' of involvement in the affairs of society, largely for the purpose of bringing about institutional and policy change. In Ireland, this growing consciousness has precipitated an upsurge in the number of immigrant community organizations as well as immigrant involvements in Irish civic life in recent times.

The subsequent sections will examine how these civic realities are reflected in the circumstances of the African community in contemporary Irish society.



30. Ibid.

...to assess the level of participation of African immigrant communities in Irish civic life, highlight the difficulties and challenges they face in civic processes, and ultimately raise their level of awareness about participating responsibly and actively in their new society.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Methodology and Samples Studied

3.1 SETTING UP THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The general aim of the research was to assess the level of participation of African immigrant communities in Irish civic life, highlight the difficulties and challenges they face in civic processes, and ultimately raise their level of awareness about participating responsibly and actively in their new society. The project, conducted over a six-month period, employed a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research tools in order to (1) give the researcher wide latitude to explore individual perceptions, attitudes and experiences in relation to the whole idea of African immigrants' participation in civic life and those conditions that militate against their involvements and (2) assist in the systematic interpretation and analysis of data.

The survey tools consisted of a structured questionnaire to examine the circumstances of African immigrants' involvements in Irish civic society and in-depth interviews employed to complement and reinforce some themes contained in the structured questionnaire. Three sample locations, namely Dublin, Dundalk and Waterford, were chosen for the survey. They were chosen in order to broaden the scope and coverage of the survey, and there was no presumption that they would wholly reflect or totally represent immigrant civic situation in the country. But it was thought that the samples would at least to some degree mirror immigrant civic situation in Ireland.

The structured questionnaire (Appendix 2) was divided into two distinct parts covering important thematic elements. Section A consisted of civic awareness issues such as respondents' understandings of the concept of civic participation, their involvements in local community activities, voluntary sector engagements, religious affairs and faith-based initiatives, sports activities, political processes and public discussion forums, obstacles to civic participation and suggestions of better ways of improving immigrant/ethnic minority civic situation. Section B basically concerned matters about personal background.

Reinforcing the structured questionnaire, the use of in-depth interviews provided an opportunity for profound responses on specific issues. Using in-depth interviews also provided the benefit of clarity on some responses elicited from the structured questionnaire interviews. In the case of in-depth interviews, questions such as the following were asked the respondents:

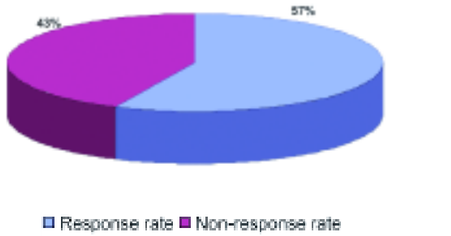
How would you relate the concept of civic participation to the notion of citizenship?
Could you describe the feeling among African immigrant communities about participating in Irish civic life?
How could African immigrants in Ireland become more civic conscious?
Finally, what do you think are the obstacles to immigrants' participation in Irish civic society, and how can this situation be corrected or changed for the better?

To elicit more responses, follow-up questions were asked where necessary. Significantly, using both structured and semi-structured questionnaires as tools provided an effective and standardized process for the comparison, analysis and interpretation of data (Sarantakos 2005).

3.2 SAMPLES STUDIED

The survey samples covered a broad range of African ethnic communities. Overall, 95 questionnaires were distributed and 35 of them were completed and returned. A further six people

FIGURE 3.1 - SURVEY RESPONSE RATES



were invited for a semi-structured interview, bringing the total number of participants to 41. This represents a response rate of 43%, as depicted in figure (3.1).

There is a growing difficulty in getting interviews from immigrant communities and ethnic minority groups due to a certain feeling about being over-studied without any meaningful or positive change in their circumstances (Feldman, Frese and Yousif, 2002). This feeling was reflected in the number of the questionnaire completed and returned, as indicated by the response rate.

Of the total number of respondents, 14 different African countries were represented, spreading across all the five regions of Africa (namely, North Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa. Figure (3.2) shows the regional spread of respondents and Appendix (1) lists country of origin of the research participants.

FIGURE 3.2 REGIONAL REPRESENTATION OF RESPONDENTS

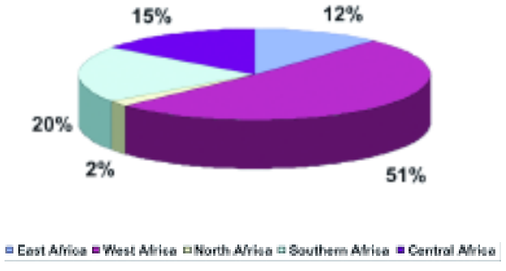
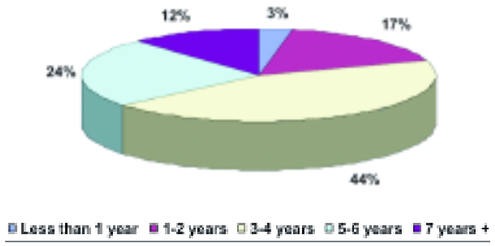


FIGURE 3.3 - LENGTH OF RESIDENCY OF RESPONDENTS



This selection was done purposively to reflect the cultural diversity of African immigrants in Ireland. Data collected from respondents also showed some diversity in terms of their status and length of residency in Ireland, English language competence, educational background, and income sources as depicted in figures (3.3 to 3.9)

FIGURE 3.4 GENDER OF RESPONDENTS

FIGURE 3.5 RESIDENCY STATUS OF RESPONDENTS

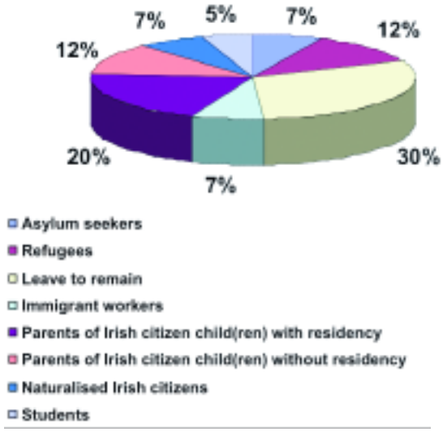


FIGURE 3.6 - SPOKEN ENGLISH COMPETENCE OF RESPONDENTS

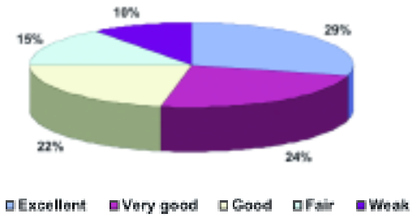


FIGURE 3.7 - WRITTEN ENGLISH COMPETENCE OF RESPONDENTS

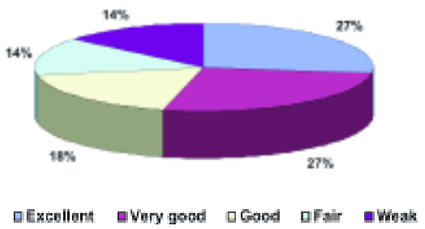


FIGURE 3.8 - LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF RESPONDENTS

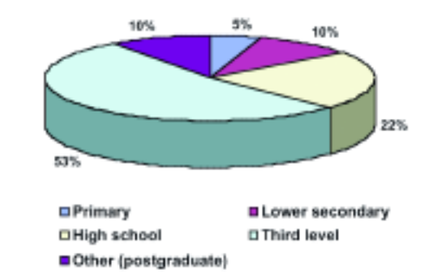


FIGURE 3.9 - SOURCE OF INCOME OF RESPONDENTS

3.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

First and foremost, this study might not be totally representative of the situation of the entire African community in Ireland. The three locations sampled might likewise not reflect wholly the civic situation of African immigrants in Ireland, given the possibility that additional sampling of more locations might have yielded other results. The low response rate also posed difficulties.

As mentioned earlier, some members of the immigrant community, including African immigrants, are becoming less interested in studies about their situation because they feel that these studies have not brought any meaningful changes in their circumstances. One of the respondent, made comments about '*lots and lots of research projects that have never done any good thing for us*'.

This particular respondent feared that the current civic participation survey might after all end up like its predecessors: on bookshelves. Another student participant made references to voluntary organizations collecting lots of money from funders without doing anything meaningful to justify the funding. These prevailing attitudes were the main difficulties encountered during the study, and future researchers as well as third sector organizations should see them as a major challenge and make efforts to address them properly.

A significant problem that also emerged in the course of the study was related to language. The diversity and number of samples studied was limited by the inability of non-speakers of English to participate in the project. As a result, useful information that might have been obtained from this category of individuals was not acquired.

...the creation of a dynamic and inclusive civic culture has become a necessity now that Ireland and the rest of EU states are beset with a flagging civic spirit among their citizenry.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH

Research Findings

This study was set to determine the civic situation of the African community in contemporary Ireland. In doing so, it sampled the feelings, perspectives and experiences of a group of African immigrants about their involvements in civic activities both at their local communities and wider Irish society.

The study has examined the prevailing difficulties and factors that hinder healthy and dynamic civic engagements by immigrant groups and ethnic minorities in Ireland using the African immigrant community as a case study. As a result, the project sought to examine possible ways of developing a better civic participation framework for the immigrant groups in the country. This is because the creation of a dynamic and inclusive civic culture has become a necessity now that Ireland and the rest of EU states are beset with a flagging civic spirit among their citizenry.

This chapter therefore presents survey results. The results are divided into five thematic sections, as follows:

- The first section summarizes respondents' understandings of the whole notion of civic participation.

- The second section deals with respondents' involvements in civic activities at their local communities and in other activities that are religious-related or faith-based.

- Section three explores the natures and levels of respondents' involvements in the activities of voluntary organizations.

- Section four focuses on respondents' participation in political activities and public forums, such as lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences and debates that have a bearing on public interests.

- The fifth section highlights the problems and obstacles that characterize the participation of African immigrants and other minority groups in Irish civic society.

4.1 WHAT DOES 'CIVIC PARTICIPATION' MEAN TO AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS?

Respondents were asked to describe what they understood by the term civic participation. The task of presenting their understandings of the concept was central to the study. However, not every respondent could answer this question.

Of the participants surveyed, only 61% of respondents were able to define civic participation. The remaining 39% were either unable or simply did not want to do so.

Of those that were able to define civic participation,
- 92% had various third level/postgraduate qualifications while the remaining
- 8% had secondary education.

Of those respondents that did not feel they could explain their understanding of the term,
- 6% had a third level qualification,
- 81% had secondary qualifications while the remaining 13% had primary school certificates.

Understandings of the meaning of civic participation varied. For instance, some responses limited civic participation to engagement in political activities such as voting in elections, political debates, electioneering campaigns, among others. Some other responses reflected a broader and more encompassing perception of the concept.

- 37% viewed civic participation as a purely political matter. According to one respondent, for example, "*Civic participation means taking part in political activities in a country.*" Another respondent understood the concept as being synonymous with *"political and citizenship participation."* One female volunteer defined the term more broadly in terms of democratic politics as, "*My being a part of the*

governance of the country where I live, contributing to and having a say in political issues and policy decisions of the government." For one activist, civic participation is "*the exercising of civic rights by citizens in the political life of their country or society."* Some respondents considered civic participation largely a matter of suffrage – the right to vote in public elections. One individual, for example, observed: *"Civic participation means having and exercising the right to vote, short and simple."* This respondent added figuratively that, "*anyone without a voting right is like an accused person whose fate lies in the hands of the magistrate who determines what happens to him."* For some respondents civic participation entailed taking active part in campaign activities aimed at electing a country's leaders. One particular respondent understood civic participation as 'civic activism', which she defined as the act of holding public officers up for scrutiny, making them accountable for their actions and redirecting their footsteps when they are going astray or not serving the interests of the public.

All of the above understandings of civic participation are valuable, as they provide some insights into some elements, goals and reasons for individuals' involvements in civic processes. However, the foregoing positions reflect the common tendency by some individuals in the world today to reduce civic practices to political engagements. Nevertheless, other responses from the survey indicated that there were some African immigrants who understood civic engagements differently and more broadly. Their perceptions ranged pointedly from the liberal to the more radical views.

Some respondents in this second category considered civic participation in terms of community actions. One respondent, for example, gave a general definition of the concept as, *"the involvement of anyone in any kind of community activity in the society where he/she lives."* This respondent's position was corroborated by a few others, who also understood participation in civic life as the act of engaging oneself in the affairs of one's immediate community for the common good. A respondent from Ethiopia reinforced this view when he noted that, *"in participating in civic activities where I come from, you put community interests first; then your own personal interests follow."* Another respondent gave a similar view as follows:

> *"When I hear the term civic participation, I think about people taking part in the affairs of their community, to help it grow socially, culturally, politically, economically and morally. It's like you're giving what you have for the benefit of everyone."*

Others viewed participation in civic life as involving some kind of interactions and inter-personal relationships among individuals in a community. For this category of respondents such interactions and relationships foster harmony and help to build a healthy and purposeful community. A female volunteer with a faith-based NGO had this to say:

> *My own understanding of being civic-minded is for one to mingle or interact with other people in one's local community, which in a way brings about understanding, love and unity.*

She added that without such interactions, "*people cannot understand one another. They will always be suspicious of one another. Civic participation breaks this kind of barrier."* Her views mirrored the perceptions of some other interviewees for whom civic engagement meant an involvement in public-spirited activities whose end was the promotion of the collective good. One such respondent stressed that the essence of living a civic life was, *"to promote the interests of the whole community rather than one's own personal goals."* One community activist linked the idea of civic practices to the whole notion of citizenship. This respondent, who stood as an independent candidate in the 2004 local elections, described an active civic life as intrinsically tied to the duties of citizenship. But for her, citizenship could be interpreted from an unorthodox or, more or less, radical perspective. She affirmed:

> *I've been involved in activities regarding active citizenship in this country even though I'm not a citizen of Ireland in the official or legal sense of the word. My own involvements have been in my capacity as an immigrant. Also my involvements have to do with participation in politics, in the affairs of my local community and in education. So, citizenship revolves around the whole area of educational, social, cultural and political lives of society. It's not entirely about a specific nationality or having the passport of a particular country. That notion is now out-of-date."*

The foregoing perceptions are significant in a number of ways. In the main, they reflect the varying ways Africans understand the phenomenon of civic participation, and perhaps also signify the diversity in cultural attitudes among different African peoples to those civic processes and communal occasions that have for a long time been part of their collective values and which have bound them together as distinct cultural communities. In this way also, respondents' understandings of engagement in civic activities emphasized this sense of community as against the individual person, a common traditional thinking still prevalent among many communities in Africa. Finally, it is significant that many respondents mirrored a current avant-garde attitude that tends to de-link civic participation form the now old-fashioned attempt to restrict it to the duties and responsibilities of passport-holding citizens of a country.

4.2 INVOLVEMENT IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The study sought to determine the extent to which African immigrants were involved in the life of their local communities in Ireland. Results showed that 63% of the respondents were involved in various local community activities, while the remaining 37% were not involved. Figure (4.1) shows level of involvement of African immigrants in the local community activities.

FORMS OF INVOLVEMENT:

1. Care for the elderly and people with disabilities: Some respondents were involved in local groups that cared for the elderly and people with disabilities. Three persons attended local community meetings and contributed to discussions. Five women were active members of some local women's support groups. One of such groups provided information to immigrant women about Irish government's policies on immigration and residency. Another woman was an organizing officer of a women's group and she had played an active role in organizing some awareness seminars for immigrant women in her area. Some respondents were involved in environmental sanitation in their locality, and as one Kenyan interviewee put it, "*In my village back home, we do collective cleaning exercises and everyone is involved. So, that's why I'm involved in this activity here."*

2. Involvement in religious and faith-based activities: A few interviewees considered involvement in some local religious and faith-based activities important forms of participation in the affairs of their local communities. Two such participants described their membership in the local church choir as one way they did community work. One of them particularly stressed that his services were basically selfless because he received no material reward from the church for his efforts. Respondents described the various religious roles they performed as follows:

- playing of instruments during worship;
- membership of prayer groups;
- praying for the sick and people with various problems;
- teaching the scriptures;
- recruiting members for their religion or sect (proselytizing);
- visiting the elderly and the sick;
- doing usher work;
- home visitations or 'calling at doors'.

These perceptions are significant. They perhaps suggest a strong consideration that many African immigrants give to matters of faith and religion as a way of community solidarity and community building[31]

FIGURE 4.1: INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

31. See Ugba (2004) for useful information about African immigrants' sense of religion and faith.

3. Cultural awareness: Some respondents were deeply involved in awareness raising locally, by helping to create cultural awareness between members of the Irish and African communities in the town where they lived. Some respondents belonged to local theatre groups and had taken part in some theatrical performances around the country.

4. Sports: Two respondents were active in sports and played football for two local clubs as part of their contribution towards the well-being of their local communities.

REASONS FOR NON-INVOLVEMENT:

It was important to gain an understanding of why other respondents did not participate in the affairs of their local communities. They gave a variety of reasons for their non-involvement as follows:

1. Work commitments: Some of the respondent mentioned that they work full-time and as such had little time for any local community commitments.

2. Racism: Some blamed their non-participation on racism and intolerance within their locality. One asylum seeker from Zimbabwe, for example, explained that he didn't feel like taking part in any community affairs because *"Africans are not welcomed and recognized here, all because of colour and the kind of place we come from."* A refugee from Rwanda noted: *I don't think I like to get involved in any activity in my local community because of the negative attitude of the majority towards us immigrants.*

3. Family commitments: Over half of those interviewees who, for lack of time, did not take part in local community activities were single mothers and married women with children. They attributed their lack of time largely to family responsibilities, in particular, child-care roles, which kept them busy for most of the time. One Kenyan woman explained:

> *You don't have time for such matters if you are a mother of three like me. Although I belong to a group called 'Mother and Toddler' in my area, I don't always have time for their meetings. My husband works full-time while I take care of the home and the kids."*

Another mother, from Zimbabwe, described her own situation: "*I am a mother full-time and single. So I have limited time for community things."*

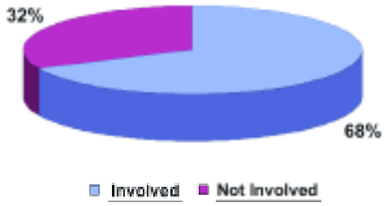
4. Lack of information: Other results showed that inadequate information was a key reason some immigrants did not participate in the affairs of their local communities. There appeared to be some kind of low-level awareness among immigrants/ethnic minorities about getting involved in local community life. Some interviewees noted, for instance, that they had never been informed about any community activities in their areas. This fact raises some important questions for consideration. Whose responsibility, for example, is it to 'inform' immigrant/ethnic minority communities about civic practices in their locality? Also, should immigrant/ethnic minority groups wait idly and endlessly to be 'informed' about the affairs or activities taking place within their locality or should they not take the initiative themselves and identify the civic occasions in their areas and then get involved in them? Issues of these kinds could be potential factors that influence the participation or non-participation of immigrant and ethnic minority people in the civic life of their locality.

Moreover, in some cases, incorrect information could also hinder the involvement of some immigrants in the affairs of their local communities. Two asylum seekers, for example, wrongly believed that their situation did not permit them to take part in any form of community activity. One other individual believed that people without permit to reside in the state were excluded from participating in local community life. However, this respondent did not explain whether official legislation barred people like him from participating or he simply excluded himself from participating because of some psychological anguish, frustration or anxiety over not having a regularized stay in the country.

4.3 INVOLVEMENT IN VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS

Respondents were asked whether they were or had ever been involved in the activities of any voluntary sector organizations. The aim of this was to determine the level of participation of African immigrants in the third sector and also to know how they felt about this kind of civic activism.

FIGURE 4.2 - RESPONDENTS INVOLVEMENT IN VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS



Results indicated that among those interviewed,
- 68% were or had been involved in various third sector activities, while the remaining 32% were not or had never been involved. Figure (4.2) shows the level of involvement of African immigrants in voluntary organisations' activities.

Among those involved,
- 78% worked as volunteers with various organizations;
- 7% were board members;
- 7% were interns.
- 4% were associate members;
- 4% were in paid positions;

It would seem that African immigrants for some reason are inclined to take part in the activities of voluntary organizations as much as they do in the affairs of their local communities.

Although respondents were not asked in the structured questionnaire interviews why they did or did not participate in third sector engagements, findings obtained during the oral interviews provided some useful information about what might be the reasons for their engagements or otherwise. One female activist explained as follows:

> *Many African immigrants and some members of other immigrant communities may choose to partake in or support the works of NGOs chiefly because they see these organizations as potential channels through which could they address their problems or speak to Irish authorities about their situation. I, for example, have been active with several NGOs since I came to this country six years ago or so, because I see them as providing a link between the immigrant communities and ethnic minority groups and Irish authorities and people.*

Another respondent who worked as an intern with a human rights NGO in Dublin tendered the following views:

> *Voluntary organizations, especially those that are concerned with the situation of immigrants and ethnic minorities, are the only mouthpiece through which immigrants speak to the people in power. So, immigrants cannot afford not to support their work in one way or another.*

One other respondent that worked with a community organization suggested a quite different reason for this relationship between immigrants/ethnic minorities and NGOs:

> *Some people, especially asylum seekers and those who fear they might not be given a residence permit, may decide to engage in the work of some NGOs, which in the long run will serve as evidence that they have been active in the society. This fact might be considered when the Justice Department is deciding whether they are qualified for a leave to remain or not.*

The study brings some important issues to the fore. As results showed:

- The largest number of interviewees involved in third sector activities (78%) were volunteers, while the remaining participants performed other roles.

- A very tiny percentage or number of interviewees that were involved in third sector work performed remunerated roles.

A previous study (Ejorh 2004) highlighted this fact about the tendency of Irish NGOs to recruit immigrants and ethnic minorities largely on voluntary basis rather than as paid workers. This situation may have some dangerous implications, as many members of these communities may tend to become cynical about the NGOs and whatever interests they are serving.

4.4 POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND PUBLIC FORUM PARTICIPATION

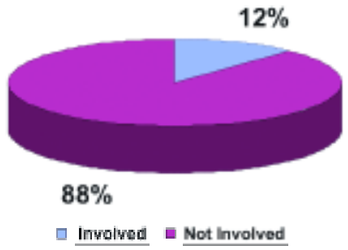
The political involvement of African immigrants and their participation in public forums were issues of centrality in the study. They were important concerns in the overall determination of the civic consciousness of African immigrants in Ireland. Participants were asked whether they were involved in political activisms in the country.

Results indicated that a much greater number of people (88%) were not involved in political activities. Only 12% of interviewees said they were involved in some form of activism. Figure (4.3) shows the level of involvement of African immigrants in political activities and public forums in Ireland.

For the few that were involved, their levels and natures of participation varied. One Nigerian woman helped in mobilizing some immigrant groups for meetings with party representatives and candidates in the 2004 local elections, to discuss the candidates' plans in the elections. Another Nigerian woman was involved both as voter and campaigner in the elections. The remaining 3 people participated as voters.

For the respondents that were politically inactive, their reasons for non-participation ranged from inadequate information about matters of politics, lack of time for political activities, sheer lack of political interests to the problem of insecurity and fear of intimidation. As one interviewee claimed, *"I'm afraid of being intimidated by the security if I become active in politics, because I don't have papers."* Some other respondents gave several other reasons for not taking active part in political activities. An Algerian attributed his non-involvement to the fact that his opinion "*would not be accepted or tolerated."* A Zimbabwean single mother noted as follows: "*I devote a lot of my time to domestic work, so I hardly have time for political matters."* Few other interviewees mentioned similar problem of lack of time as their reason for not taking part in political activities. Some other people could not participate for reasons of not having regularized residency status in the state. One such interviewee from South Africa captured her situation thus: *"My status does not permit me to get*

FIGURE 4.3 - RESPONDENTS PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AND PUBLIC FORUMS



woman accorded with the above sentiments: *"Because I don't have residency I was not qualified to participate or vote."* A Sudanese man noted a lack of reception as the reason for his non-involvement in political activities: *"I can't take part because I feel I'm not welcome to participate."*

MEMBERSHIPS OF IRISH POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS/PARTIES

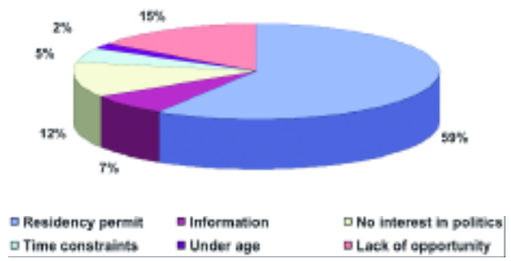
As to whether participants held memberships with political associations or parties in the country, responses indicated that a vast majority (98%) of respondents held no memberships with any political associations or parties. Only (2%) of the respondents belonged to a political association.

FIGURE 4.4 - RESPONDENTS MEMBERSHIP OF IRISH POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS/PARTIES

Figure 4.4 shows membership of Irish political parties. The study also sought to know why respondents did not belong to any associations or parties (see figure 4.5). Results pointed to a number of factors, which included the following:

- 59% of people were not members of any political groups because they felt their non-residency status disqualified them from any form of membership.
- 7% of respondents had insufficient information about becoming members of political groups.
- 12% were simply not interested in politics because they considered it to be a bad and dangerous game.
- 5% lacked sufficient time to engage themselves as members of political groups.
- 2% of respondent did not bother to become a member because he was under-aged.
- 15% of interviewees felt Irish political groups did not give immigrants/ethnic minorities any encouragement or opportunities to become their members.

FIGURE 4.5 - REASONS FOR NON-PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL PARTIES



VOTING IN THE 2004 LOCAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

A similar pattern of responses was obtained when interviewees were asked whether they voted in the 2004 local elections. It was found that only 27% of the samples surveyed voted in those elections and 73% did not vote (see figure 4.6).

Of the 73% that did not vote, the following reasons were provided:

- 3% felt that, as students they were not qualified to vote;
- 17% of respondents were just not interested in voting.
- 7% did not vote because they believed that as asylum seekers, they were unqualified to vote.
- 3% were away and, as such, did not vote.
- 40% of respondents did not vote for reasons of not having a regularized residency status.
- 30% of persons did not register for voters' cards.

FIGURE 4.6 - REASONS FOR NON-PARTICIPATION IN THE 2004 LOCAL ELECTIONS

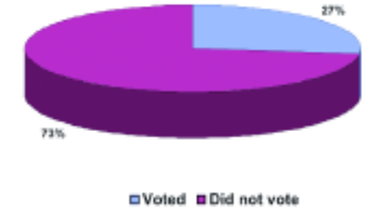


FIGURE 4.7 - REASONS MENTIONED WHY RESPONDENTS DID NOT VOTE IN THE 2004 LOCAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

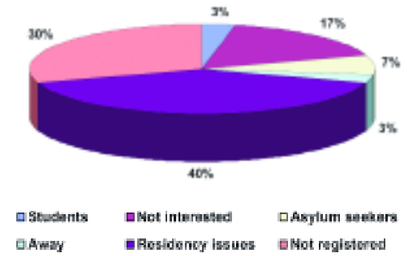


Figure (4.7) illustrates this situation.

Some of these reasons, however, were the result of misinformation on the immigrants ignorance of Irish legislation on immigrant political rights. Irish law, for example, permits asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants with proper residency status to vote in local elections. However, while asylum seekers are not legally qualified to stand as candidates in these elections, refugees and other immigrants with proper residency status can. Like some EU countries, Irish legislation permits only naturalized immigrants and EU citizens to vote in EU parliamentary elections, while EU residents in Ireland cannot vote in Irish national elections.

Another instance of misinformation about or ignorance of the voting rights of immigrants and ethnic minorities was evidenced by some interviewees with regularized residency but who wrongly believed that they were unqualified to vote in Irish local elections. A Kenyan man with leave to

remain in Ireland typified this case when he reasoned:

How can I vote when immigrants are not allowed to vote in this country?

Two other individuals like him equally did not vote because they thought they had no right to do so. Another classic case of ignorance was manifested by a refugee who did not vote for two reasons: firstly, because he was late for voter registration and secondly, as he said, *"I was not too sure whether I was entitled to vote."*

Two particular interviewees cited some unpleasant experiences they had in the hands of public officers during registration for voters' cards. One person recounted as follows:

> *I did not have an appropriate identity card, so when I got to the Gardai for signature on my document, he made so much problem with me. He told me to wait while he went inside the office. I became afraid and ran away."*

The other respondent described his ordeal:

> *When I went to submit my form, I came to this officer, a woman. I handed my form to her; she then went through it and looked at me roughly. She threw the form back at me as she walked away, saying something like, 'When you get it properly fixed, then you can come back if you're still keen.'*

Some responses were perhaps indicative of a growing apathy within immigrant/ethnic minority communities towards political affairs in Ireland. To justify this position, interviewees were asked whether they knew the names of their local TD or Member of Parliament. Only 39% answered in the affirmative and 61% said they did not know. The same pattern of results was recorded when the study sought to know whether participants voted in the 2004 Irish national and EU parliamentary elections. Only 3 respondents who were naturalized Irish citizens voted in those elections. The remaining respondents did not vote, as none of them held Irish or EU citizenship, the official requirement for voting in those elections. However, the study set to determine whether respondents' residency situations influenced how they participated in political activities. The majority of them (71%) responded that their residency situations influenced their political participation; 29% said it did not. The following were some explanations by respondents about how their situations of residency influenced the extent and natures of their political involvements:

- *You can't vote if you don't have a residential permit. They refused to grant me one, so I didn't vote?* (Nigerian man).
- *You're not recognized in this country, even to take part in certain activities like politics, if you don't have a status. Residential permit is like a driving licence. Without it you can't move a car* (Nigerian woman).
- *Maybe, being a student, I am not eligible to vote or participate in politics here* (Sierra Leonean women).
- *Because I'm not yet an Irish citizen, I cannot vote at all levels; and also I'm not able to express my civic rights* (South African man).
- *Unless one is an Irish citizen one cannot participate in the EU and national elections, hence we who are not cannot do anything in these areas* (Zambian woman).
- *I have no permit yet and the Gardai are harassing immigrants, I mean those from particular countries, which is why most of us are not keen to involve in Irish affairs* (Nigerian woman).
- *There is no full franchise for non-citizens; voting rights are limited to local elections, which is not enough* (Zimbabwean woman).
- *I fear to be persecuted or 'picked on' if I'm involved in any political activities because I'm an immigrant and not recognized* (Sudanese man).
- *If the Gardai or Immigration does not recognize you in your locality, then you cannot vote* (Rwandan man).
- *I'm concerned more about my problems than political activities* (Algerian man with a failed asylum case).
- *If you are not Irish, you cannot take part in some things like becoming a political party member* (Nigerian man).

The study further sought to ascertain if a positive change in respondents' residency situations would change their attitudes towards civic activism in the country. In doing this, they were asked hypothetically that, assuming they had no permanent residency status or Irish citizenship at the moment and they were granted one eventually, would this change how they participated in civic society? Approximately 80% of the participants replied that it would have some influence on the manners and levels of their involvement. 17% responded that it would have no effect on how they participated, while 2% said it was dependent on what the circumstances were.

Overall, the findings in this section are significant on two fundamental counts. Firstly, they show how immigrant/ethnic minority participation in Irish political life is an important factor in the determination of the overall civic equation in Ireland. Also they indicate the centrality of how an increase in immigrant/ethnic minority political rights might enhance the participation and integration of these marginalized communities into Irish society.

4.5 OBSTACLES TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION

One important issue recurrent in the study involved problems that might constrain active immigrant/ethnic minority participation in Irish civic life. Interviewees reported a number of difficulties (some of which have already been seen) they experienced in their efforts to become civically active. Some of these problems mirrored common perceptions and known situations about immigrants/ethnic minorities, and they included issues like racism, intolerance and lack of social inclusion, inadequate information, linguistic difficulties and problem of regularization of residency.

Racism, Intolerance and Lack of Inclusion

Interviewees identified racist and intolerant behaviours current in different aspects of Irish society as one potential threat to immigrant/ethnic minority aspiration to increased participation in civic life in the country. Participants also linked the lack of social inclusion of immigrants/ethnic minorities to these twin problems of racism and intolerance. Their reflections reinforced previous studies on these dangerous and inhibiting trends[32]. The following are some samples:

- *The problem is that of non-acceptance, as the country still believes deeply in ethnic nationalism, 'us' and 'them'* (Nigerian woman).
- *Racist issues partly affect participation. Certain times there are no proper laws on how to deal with this problem* (Sierra Leonean woman).
- *The problem is lack of inclusion and acceptance* (South African man).
- *Immigrants' participation is low because nobody invites them to participate in civic engagements. They are not recognized in the scheme of things* (Ethiopian man).
- *The major problem certainly is lack of an inclusive mechanism, racial discrimination, hatred for foreigners and being classified as 'persona non grata'* (Nigerian female activist).

There were some respondents who would not consider Ireland a racist country as such. One such individual was an independent candidate, mentioned earlier, who contested in the 2004 local elections. This interviewee dispelled the notion prevalent within the immigrant/ethnic minority community about Irish people being racist. These views were based more on first hand experiences in the course of those elections than on commonly held views:

> *As you are aware, I put myself forward in those elections, because I understood how important they were. My decision was a challenge for me and it gave me the opportunity to see the other side of Irish people, because, for instance, I always thought that my particular locality was a racist town and so on. But that perception changed. The election found me wrong. That, however, does not mean that few racist elements do not exist among Irish people. From knocking on one door to another and asking people to give me their votes, I saw the other side of Irish people. They are not as racist as some us would believe. All they need is information. I had to dispel a lot of myth in the process of my campaign. As I said, the elections were a huge challenge for me. There were a few people who were not happy to see my face. But such behaviour is normal. They did it not because I was an immigrant. They do it to other people too because the politicians have failed them over the years.*

There were some interviewees who apportioned blame principally to the Irish media for the tides of

32. See, for instance, Amnesty International (Irish Section) (2000/2001); Fanning, B. (2002); MacGreil, M. (1996); McVeigh, R. (1996)

racist and intolerant behaviours directed at immigrants and ethnic minorities in the country, practices that weaken efforts at achieving social inclusion for these marginalized groups. One particular individual noted that Irish people were made to believe a lot of terrible things about immigrants, in particular those from third world countries and that these unwholesome representations directly changed their attitudes towards foreigners: "*The people got their information from media propaganda, from government ministers and politicians who were seeking political gains. They then based their conclusions on what they were told.*" A respondent from Ghana reinforced these views pointedly:

> *The Irish media have to take a huge chunk of the blame, if you can quantify blame, because as moulders and shapers of public opinion they have greatly misled Irish people into believing that immigrants are bad and that they all have come to sponge the Irish economy dry. In this kind of setting immigrants will not have the morale to be active in civic life in this country.*

Lack of Information and Civic Education Programmes

Interviewees identified the lack of good information networks and civic education programmes as factors that also restrain active immigrant/ethnic minority participation in civic society in Ireland. As mentioned earlier in this report, efforts and discourses on immigration in Ireland, until very recently, had been directed largely towards such issues as racism towards immigrants/ethnic minorities, needs of specific groups of immigrants such as asylum seekers, refugees, children/minors, etc., employment, health, housing, education and so on. These issues were considered in terms of how they were germane to the realization of social inclusion for these groups. This scenario has therefore left a notable gap in institutional and organizational initiatives as well as academic inquiries into the immigrant/ethnic minority situation in Ireland. A classic instance of such gaps is the absence or paucity of immigrant/ethnic minority-based civic participation initiatives and research[33]. Perhaps this explains the evident lack of an information programme for raising the awareness of the immigrant/ethnic minority population about participating actively in civic life in Ireland. As one interviewee described this deficiency,

> *There is a marked absence of good information programmes about how immigrants can become active in civic processes. I've lived in this country for six years and have never come across any information or heard about any projects initiated to promote immigrant participation in civic activities. If they do exist, then they are limited to very few people and very few places, otherwise many people would have known about them.*

One other interviewee asked rhetorically: *"Can you get involved in something you don't know or ever heard about? How can you become aware of a thing you have never read or heard or been told about?*

Language Barrier

Language has been identified in the literature as an element central to both the active participation of immigrant communities and their integration into the host society. As mentioned in Section 2.3, insufficient knowledge of the language of the host country and a lack of access to education and training could hinder immigrants' efforts to participate actively in civic society and also attain integration. Many immigrants in Ireland, in particular those from the former communist Europe and non-English speaking countries of Africa and Asia, do not understand English, Ireland's official language. This language deficiency potentially puts these categories of immigrants in some difficulty in terms of their level of communication with other members of Irish society. As a result, the level of their participation and integration into society may tend to be low.

Results from the study pointed to this problem of communication and poor understanding of the English language as a critical factor limiting the participation of a large section of the immigrant/ethnic minority community in Ireland. Some interviewees also noted the grave difficulty

33. See Cotter, G. (2004) for more useful information about existing gaps in research on refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in Ireland.

experienced by an increasing number of immigrants who wished to take some language tuition. One particular problem mentioned was the inability of many immigrants to pay the language tuition fees charged by private schools. A second problem was the inability of some immigrants to avail of opportunities for free language instructions provided by a few public agencies and NGOs. A respondent from Congo summarized the situation as follows:

> *A poor understanding of the language is a problem for those who cannot speak English. I know some refugees from my country who have found it difficult to get jobs because they do not understand English. Although there are some private schools that provide language training to non-speakers of English, not many people can afford the fees they charge. Also a few NGOs organize free lessons for immigrants, but their efforts are limited. When I came to this country some years ago, there were not as many immigrants as there are now. So, the NGOs and some public agencies catered for the language need of all those who could not speak English. But the situation has changed today as the number of immigrants has grown.*

Problem of Normalization of Residency/Insecurity

The problem of normalization of residency was recurrent in the study. Interviewees cited this as a critical obstacle to their participation in Irish civic life. As already seen in the preceding sections, this factor also determined the extent and manner of involvements of many immigrants in civic activisms. Against this backdrop, some interviewees pointed out that immigrants without a normalized residency status would find it difficult to engage in public-spirited activities. Some contended that this might create feelings of fear and insecurity in those immigrants affected by this problem, thus disabling their willingness to get involved in any manner of civic endeavours. As one interviewee pointed out,

> "*Some people who do not have papers fear being persecuted or even picked up by the Gardai if they are found taking part in some activities that are against government policies*

Some interviewees reinforced this feeling of fear and insecurity against the background of the recurrent wave of Gardai clampdowns on particular sections of the immigrant/ethnic minority community. A respondent whose application for a leave to remain was turned down confirmed that the lives of many members of his ethnic community who were in a similar situation were now ruled by a sense of insecurity about their circumstances in the country. According to him, "*Everyone is afraid of being sent home. No one wants to be visible any more. Who would like to be sent home to suffer?*"

Similar responses were made as regards the issue of naturalization. Two respondents with over five years of residency in the State claimed that their applications for naturalization were refused despite that they met the criteria stipulated by the Ministry for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, under whose jurisdiction such matters fall. One of them, a father of an Irish citizen child noted that he had been working and paying taxes since the last two years and had no criminal record. He wondered why his application would not be granted when the Justice Department emphasizes gainful employment as a necessary condition for the granting of naturalization.

All of these problems pose a serious challenge to the current march towards the institution of a dynamic civic culture in Ireland. They are important determinants of how the immigrant/ethnic minority community could be drafted in as mutual building-partners of a new Irish society. They are critical issues that should be addressed by all stakeholders in society. The next chapter, therefore, will examine some possible ways, suggested by respondents themselves, of improving the current civic situation in Ireland insofar as it concerns the immigrant/ethnic minority community.

...for better results statutory and non-statutory bodies should consider carrying out national campaigns aimed at re-educating Irish people and correcting certain misrepresentations about immigrants and ethnic minorities.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions and Recommendations

As results showed, respondents reported a number of factors that undermine healthy and dynamic civic involvements by immigrants and ethnic minorities in Ireland. Some of these problems, as already seen in the preceding chapter, include racism, intolerance, absence of a proper social inclusion framework, inadequate information about civic values/lack of a civic education programme, language difficulty and restrictions/sense of insecurity resulting from non-regularization of residency.

Providing their own views, interviewees made some useful contributions as to how to tackle these obstacles. Some of the recommendations ranged from the formulation of some measures to tackle racism and intolerance and promote social inclusion, expansion of political opportunities for marginalized communities, state responsibility to fashion an inclusive civic participation programme, the establishment of a national consultative forum for the immigrant/ethnic minority community to the creation of more opportunities for language training for immigrants/ethnic minorities.

5.1 Sustained Measures Against Racism and Intolerance

Interviewees recommended that efforts be intensified to stem the current tides of racial behaviour and intolerance in the country. Although some participants described the existing Irish government's policy against racism and inequality as a positive initiative in intent, they considered it weak in execution. It was suggested, therefore, that for better results statutory and non-statutory bodies should consider carrying out national campaigns aimed at re-educating Irish people and correcting certain misrepresentations about immigrants and ethnic minorities.

Interviewees suggested some ways of embarking on such an initiative, which include radio and television programmes, newspaper advertorials and commentaries, leaflets, billboard advertisements, intercultural seminars and conferences, etc. Such measures could be effective channels of setting perceptions rights, changing attitudes and refining behaviours. They could also generate intercultural understandings and become useful instruments for building social capital amongst the various communities that constitute contemporary Irish society. As observed by one interviewee, racism is the principal reason some immigrants are reluctant to participate in Irish civic life. Interviewees reckoned that some meaningful work has been done so far in the fight against manifestations of racial prejudice, but that the still prevalence of racism in the country calls for the stepping up of efforts for more positive outcomes.

5.2 State's Responsibility in Promoting Active Citizenship

The Irish government's recent move to set up a task force to advise it on best ways of building an active citizenship culture is a welcome development. But, the non-representation of immigrant/ethnic minority communities in this 20-member strong body is somewhat worrying. However, any emerging framework should consider redefining the meaning of citizenship in inclusive terms to embrace increased opportunities for both non-holders of the Irish passport and non-regularized immigrants so that they could participate and contribute their quota to civic society. Ireland is one of the few EU countries where non-Irish nationals are given a right to vote in local elections. The Irish government should also be commended for giving non-nationals the opportunity to stand as candidates in the last 2004 local elections. As one interviewee who contested as an independent candidate in those elections affirmed, *"The Irish government, I believe, realized through this action that political participation is a major factor for the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities in this country."*

However, Irish authorities should seriously consider widening spaces for the inclusion of more members of the immigrant/ethnic minority community through a blanket amnesty to immigrants, especially those who have resided in the state for a number of years. Ireland would be following in the

bold footsteps of countries like Spain and Italy who have embarked upon such progressive actions. Conversely, current selective clampdowns targeted at specific groups within the immigrant community should be discouraged. Such clampdowns are capable of promoting hatred amongst Ireland's diverse communities. They could also inspire fear and a sense of insecurity, as already expressed by some interviewees, in those immigrants directly affected by these operations and also in those groups of immigrants without regularized residency status in the state. Such actions, moreover, are as demoralizing as they are enervating of zeal for any civic matters.

5.3 Increased Opportunities for Participation in Mainstream Politics

Membership of mainstream political parties in Ireland is currently predominantly Irish in character. As reported by Fanning, Mutwarasibo and Chadamoyo (2003), there are no particular measures by political parties in the country to encourage membership and candidature from immigrant communities and ethnic minorities. As at the time of their report, only one party stood a candidate from the immigrant/ethnic minority community. In 2004, the situation had remained no different. For instance, six non-Irish candidates contested in the local elections of that year on an independent platform.

In the present study, interviewees noted this reality as a tendency that circumscribes the extent of immigrant/ethnic minority participation in Irish political life. They, therefore, recommended that the political parties should create measures of inclusion to provide opportunities for more numbers of immigrants and ethnic minorities to be drafted in as party members and candidates in elections. This could serve as a veritable way of mobilizing immigrant/ethnic minority support for the parties that are able to introduce these measures. In addition, these initiatives might directly determine the future balance of power in the realm of governance now that immigrant/ethnic minority population in Ireland has jolted upwards in recent years.

5.4 Civic Education Programmes as a Need

Interviewees noted the role of civic education programmes in stimulating greater civic awareness among immigrant/ethnic minority groups. Such programmes should constitute part of the roles of statutory bodies and third sector organizations in the integration of marginalized communities into Irish society. A good civic education agenda should be able to provide adequate information to immigrants and ethnic minorities about the importance of becoming civically active in society and best civic practices. It should also enable immigrants and ethnic minorities to become aware of Irish political institutions and how they work. More importantly, it should help marginalized communities to know their rights to participate and contribute in the processes of the determination of their future through making right choices, and more so, challenge policies and practices that offend the sensibility of nation-building.

Indeed, civic education programmes will provide not only immigrants/ethnic minorities but also local Irish people necessary information about active citizenship. And for effective outcomes, NGOs, especially those led by immigrant/ethnic minority groups, should be provided needed funds to be able to organize civic awareness programmes and also produce civic education materials, such as pamphlets, leaflets, flyers, calendars, etc, for their community members or primary stakeholders. Without funding, the efforts of these organizations would be ineffectual.

5.5 Language Training

It has been noted in this report that many immigrants in Ireland such as those from non-English speaking countries of Africa and some individuals from Asia and East European countries lack proficiency in the use of English. These groups of immigrants face a serious barrier in communication and this directly impedes their active participation in different facets of Irish society. To solve this problem, interviewees recommended that training in the use of English was an imperative. Although some government agencies and a few NGOs currently provide English language classes for non-English speakers, their efforts are limited. Their efforts should be complemented by the involvement of more NGOs and state agencies in these initiatives. This would increase the ability of more numbers of immigrants that participate in civic activities both in their locality and the wider Irish society.

5.6 Need for a National Consultative Forum for the Immigrant/Minority Community

Interviewees suggested that the Irish government set up a national consultative forum[34] composed of representatives from the immigrant/ethnic minority community, statutory agencies, the third sector and religious bodies. Such a forum should be given the task of discussing every issue affecting immigrant/ethnic minority situations in the country, such as racial intolerance and other forms of discrimination, matters of immigration and citizenship, best policies and practices of social inclusion, legislative instruments relating to immigrants, and how best immigrants/ethnic minorities can participate in Irish civic life, among others. Such a forum would serve as a good interface between members of the immigrant/ethnic minority community and Irish people, their partners in the task of nation building.

34. See also Fanning, Mutwarasibo and Chadamowo (2004).

Appendices

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF IMMIGRANTS INTERVIEWED

Algeria

Angola

Democratic Republic of Congo

Ethiopia

Ghana

Kenya

Nigeria

Rwanda

Senegal

Sierra Leone

South Africa

Sudan

Zambia

Zimbabwe

CIVIC PARTICIPATION QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey is aimed to determine the civic participation situation of African immigrant communities in Ireland. Essentially, it will determine how Africans in Ireland understand civic participation, how they participate in civic activities, their level of involvements, the difficulties they encounter in participating and how they expect the situation to be corrected or improved upon. The ultimate purpose of the survey is to create greater awareness among Africans about their new society and also to influence policy changes that would improve their circumstances. The researcher is assuring the respondents that their identity will be kept confidential.

Thank you so much for filling in this questionnaire. Please tick the boxes ☐ as appropriate

SECTION A: **CIVIC AWARENESS/PARTICIPATION QUESTIONS:**

1. What do you understand by the term 'Civic Participation'?

2. Are you involved in any community activities in your locality? YES ☐ NO ☐

3. If your answer was YES, please describe how you are involved

4. If your answer was NO, please give reasons why you are not involved

5. Are you involved in any sports or other public activities in your locality or elsewhere in the country? YES ☐ NO ☐
6. If your answer was YES, please describe what you do

7. Are you involved or have you ever been involved in the activities of any voluntary organization(s) in the country? YES ☐ NO ☐

8. If your answer was YES, which of these best describes your role/situation? - (i) Volunteer ☐ (ii) Intern ☐ (iii) Paid staff member ☐ (iv) Board member ☐ (v) Associate member ☐ (vi) Other (please specify)

9. Are involved in any religious or faith-based activities in your locality? YES ☐ NO ☐
10. If the answer was YES, please describe your role or what you do.

11. Please list any organizations you belong to

12. Have you ever taken part in any public lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences, debates, etc.? YES ☐ NO ☐

13. Do you take part in any political activities in the country? YES ☐ NO ☐
14. If your answer was YES, what kinds of activity are you/have you been involved in?

15. If your answer to Q. 14 was NO, please give reasons for your non-involvement

16. Do you belong to any political association/political parties in Ireland? YES ☐ NO ☐
17. If you do not, could you explain why?

18. Do you know the name your local TD/Member of Parliament? YES ☐ NO ☐

19. Did you vote in the last 2004 local elections? YES ☐ NO ☐
20. If you did not vote, could you explain why?

21. Did you vote in the last Irish/European Parliamentary elections? YES ☐ NO ☐
22. If you did not vote, could you explain why?

23. Does your residency status determine how you participate in political activities? YES ☐ NO ☐
24. If your answer was YES, could you explain how it is affected?

25. Assuming you don't have a permanent residency status at the moment and you are granted one eventually, would this influence the way you participate in civic activities in the country? YES ☐ NO ☐

26. What do you consider the major problems that immigrants and ethnic minorities encounter in their participation in civic activities in Ireland?

27. In your own opinion, how can this situation be addressed?

28. What could political parties do to be more responsive to immigrant communities?

29. What could the government do to help immigrant communities participate more actively in society?

SECTION B: PERSONAL DETAILS

30. What is your gender? Male ☐ Female ☐

31. What is your original nationality?

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32. Which of these best describes your marital status?
(i) Single ☐ (ii) Married ☐ (iii) Married with child(ren) ☐
(iv) Separated ☐ (v) Divorced ☐ (vi) Single mother ☐ (vii) Widowed ☐

33. How long have you been living in Ireland?

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34. Which of the following best describes your status in Ireland?
(i) Asylum seeker ☐ (ii) Refugee ☐ (iii) Leave to remain ☐
(iv) Immigrant worker ☐ (v) Parent of Irish-born child with residency ☐
(vi) Parent of Irish-born child without residency ☐ (vii) Student ☐
(viii) Naturalized Irish citizen ☐ (ix) Other (please specify) ☐

35. What languages do you speak, read or write?

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36. Which of these best describes your ability to speak English?
(i) Excellent ☐ (ii) Very good ☐ (iii) Good ☐ (iv) Fair ☐ (v) Weak ☐

37. Which of these best describes your ability to write English?
(i) Excellent ☐ (ii) Very good ☐ (iii) Good ☐ (iv) Fair ☐ (v) Weak ☐

38. Which of these best describes your level of education?
Primary education ☐ (ii) Lower Secondary education ☐
(iii) High School ☐ (iv) Third level education ☐ (v) Other (please specify) ☐

39. Which of these best describes your source(s) of income?
(i) Paid employment ☐ (ii) Private business ☐ (iii) Student grants ☐
(iv) Social welfare ☐ (v) Other (please specify) ☐

40. Please give any other comments you think may be relevant to this survey

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2b. Some Sample questions for oral interviews

- How would you define civic participation?
- How would you relate the concept of civic participation to the notion of citizenship?
- Describe the general feeling among African immigrant communities about participating in Irish civic life?
- How could African immigrants in Ireland become more civic conscious?
- Why is it important that African immigrants and other ethnic minority groups become actively involved in Irish civic life?
- What do you think are the obstacles to immigrants' participation in Irish civic society?
- In your own opinion, how can this situation be corrected or changed for the better?

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