

THE NATIONAL ACTION PLAN AGAINST RACISM

A WRITTEN SUBMISSION MADE ON BEHALF OF

THE AFRICA SOLIDARITY CENTRE

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

SEPTEMBER 2002

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Africa Solidarity Centre

The Africa Solidarity Centre (ASC) represents a broad constituency of people from Africa in Ireland, including professionals, students, citizens, refugees and asylum seekers.

One of the central concerns that led to the establishment of the ASC is the historic underdeveloped image of Africa generally portrayed to the Irish public. Currently this image is reinforced by the arrival of African immigrants to Ireland whether by choice or necessity. Many of the latter are refugees and asylum seekers, which continues to reinforce the picture of African poverty and conflict.

The main focus of the ASC is toward the African communities now developing in Ireland and their relationships with this country and visa versa. The ASC seeks to influence the future welfare of African men, women and children so that the continued poverty and social exclusion their communities now experience may be challenged. It seeks the active and effective participation of African communities in Irish life.

The ASC is devoted to the creation of an integrated, equitable and functionally diverse society within which African communities find accommodation with ease.

As distinct immigrant communities one factor influencing the quality and progress of integration and accommodation and to which this submission addresses itself is the immigrant experience of racism.

The ASC advocates an integrated approach to racism that draws upon social justice, human rights and community development.

The ASC organised a consultation in August 2002, to examine and submit its analysis with recommendations on the issue of racism in response to the request by the Department of Justice seeking a public view in its drawing up a National Action Plan against Racism.

1.2 Identification of Key Areas

- Through the consultation process, participants identified the following:
- Need for an Adequate Definition of Racism

- Particularities of Irish history
- Existing Irish Social Problems
- Public Institutions: Knowledge and Language
- African Community Development
- African Representation

1.0 A DEFINITION OF RACISM

2.1 An Adequate Definition of Racism

It is proposed that the term, racism, as defined in the National Action Plan against Racism is an inadequate starting point. The limitation of the definition may itself have a negative impact.

Its current and exclusive use:

- Takes away from the fact that certain current problems experienced particularly by members of new African immigrant communities affect all sectors of Irish society; they are human problems and not unique to or caused by those from outside Irish society;
- Fails to draw attention to the pre-existing, still unresolved and inter-related social and material problems stemming from economic disadvantage, social exclusion, and increasing problems associated with anti-social behaviour throughout Irish society;
- Reinforces a negative image of cultural or ethnic difference by possibly ghettoising or stigmatising actions relating to anti-racism;
- Interprets equal provision for, and the positive development of immigrant communities, as an 'extra' rather than as an integral part of contemporary Irish governance and society.

2.2 Recommendations:

The ASC recommends that the definition of racism and its content as expressed in the National Action Plan Against Racism be more broadly developed on an understanding of human rights, social justice and community development as well as that of racism and multiculturalism.

3.0 PARTICULARITIES OF IRISH HISTORY

3.1 The Past

The particular history of Ireland and Irish society may play a part in the way it responds to increasing diversity. The legacy of colonialism involving a succession of invasions and occupations over a thousand years, and its reality of being a small island-nation, may lead to a fear and suspicion of strangers and foreigners among a part of the population.

This fear and suspicion of immigrants by the indigenous society may easily be exploited and expanded as racism by those whose power interests are affected by a changing society.

3.2 The Present

It is evident that poverty, social exclusion and the resultant increasing competition for scarce resources frequently exacerbate divisions between disadvantaged groups in society. The issue of available housing needs is a case in point. These divisions occur as some groups perceive others getting a greater slice of an already diminishing pie.

Irish people may believe that scarce resources are being dipped into to provide for and accommodate new immigrant communities.

This submission states that it is important, while responding to the particular problems associated with racism, to ensure that the resources issue not be separated from or dealt with in isolation from the larger current problems of social and economic disadvantage affecting certain local indigenous communities in Ireland.

There is evidence of emerging anti-social behaviour due to poverty, lack of opportunity, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, divorce, long-term unemployment, marginalisation, urban neglect, poor healthcare, etc. This affects the proper functioning of society and leads to a dehumanising of persons and their relationships. Such an environment is a seedbed for racism as one more anti-social act.

The African Solidarity Centre reminds Government of an urgency in confronting the current anti-social drift in Irish society and calls for attention to a social recovery which promotes human rights and social justice and actively supports interpersonal respect for human dignity.

3.3 In addition the Africa Solidarity Centre recommends :

- An emphasis on the role of the host community, both in terms of providers of, as well as audiences, to positive education and projects relating to people from Africa in Ireland.
- The establishment of education programmes based on the participation of returning Irish immigrants who can discuss their experiences and understandings of the many counties and communities they have visited and lived in, providing important reminders that many people migrate to other places to live, work and settle.
- Improvement of public education regarding Irish political, economic and social systems in general as well as their development in response to recent factors such as globalisation.
- Provision of publicly available and verifiable facts regarding experiences of racism.
- Dissemination of information about Africans, their countries and cultures, and contributions to global knowledge as well as about their natural resources and trade links.
- Fact-giving on the actual percentage of immigration, its categories and its contribution to the needs of Ireland as, for example, in health, agricultural and other sectors.
- Support for the adaptation of school curriculum content to include material relevant to a comprehensive understanding of Africa, and the provision of training and resources necessary.

4.0 PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

4.1 The Cabinet

The messages which Government sends to civil servants, service providers and the general public in the process of executing its duties, about those coming to Ireland, whether to settle, work, study or to seek refuge, have possibly the most substantial effect on their reception, integration and quality of life, and on the development of an equitable and diverse society as a whole. This is particularly significant for Ireland as the history of migration to the country and the ethnic diversification of the population is relatively new.

4.2 The Civil Service

The interpretation and implementation of relevant immigration policies are often inconsistent and fragmented, hampered by interdepartmental infighting, and often defying the efforts of even well-situated individuals to provide assistance for those who are vulnerable, at the mercy of the system and who have few resources to draw upon.

The general public is not always aware of these contradictions or failures and depends on its government administrators about matters relating to immigration.

4.3 Political Representatives

The words and acts of certain politicians reflect a resistance to positive change in the areas of racism, diversity and integration in Ireland. Politicians have had to be reminded about the quality of the language they use in discussing these matters and have been subject to reprimand.

4.4 Government Legislation

Bills drafted into law with regard to the immigrant seem to be extraordinarily punitive.

The preparation and presentation of such to the public is very sensitive. Deportation and voluntary repatriation has a negative social impact.

Without doubt, the existence and exercise of related legislation can be seized upon in the public domain as in the media to feed racism and create substantial social and material obstacles to the immigrant communities.

4.5 International Bodies

Documentation and interstate policies and positions may also reflect flawed language. However well-intentioned, policy as reflected in documentation and used to justify intervention in African affairs as a contribution to the alleviation of poverty and the promotion of development may also reinforce the negative image of Africa and underline the balance of power between Africa and Europe.

A perusal of the very literature emanating from UN Summits might reveal how frequent and pervasive Western interests interpret African concerns to their own advantage.

4.6 Recommendations:

The establishment of a formal and consistent anti-racism and cultural awareness training programme for cabinet ministers, their advisors and civil servants; it must provide an informed content and the appropriate language necessary for an emerging diversity;

Similar training to be made accessible to staff and management of public and private organisations, with respect to both recruitment as well as service delivery to their respective clienteles. For example, it is important not only to train nurses to be sensitive and to accommodate the cultural differences and requirements of their patients, but also to be able to respond to, and educate, patients and their relatives on how to confront racist comment from either the host or the guest community.

5.0 AFRICAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Capacity Building

The ASC consultation focused at great length on both the possibilities and pitfalls challenging and confronting African communities in Ireland.

It is understood that African communities and voluntary sector organisations are just beginning to be established, and have not reached the level of capacity which Irish organisations have achieved.

However, it is essential that these organisations be fully supported and empowered. The tendency of funding organisations to provide for projects, rather than for the developmental needs of organisations, so that they can reach the stage where they are sufficiently staffed and trained to carry out projects, was noted.

Seed and start-up funding may often be too little and for too short a period for such organisations to get on their feet in a sustainable fashion.

There is a critical need to recognise the contributions of the growing African sector to promote African development and to oppose racism even at great risk to themselves and their prospects.

It is sometimes believed that indigenous voluntary and non-governmental organisations easily get funding to carry out projects about, or in the name of, African and other new ethnic communities; that their success is linked to being more established or having greater resources to fulfil the administrative requirements that accompany grants. They seem often to be sought to represent and convey the interests of these communities.

5.2 Recommendations:

- Recognition of the current and potential contribution of the growing African sector; most of its organisations are new initiatives.
- Establishment of developmental-focused funding which provides funds necessary for staffing, training and effective start-up for fledgling African organisations;
- Establishment of a government funding scheme, similar to that set up by Ireland Aid for missionary religious groups and other overseas development and humanitarian initiatives in a manner of block funding. This would also be seen as support for the creation of a co-operative work ethos among groups in a manner of avoiding

overlapping objectives and activities.

5.3 Employment

The climate of ‘protectionism’ in certain professions, as in veterinary medicine, is curtailing Africans’ ability to gain employment and promotion in the fields where they are properly qualified.

This has consequences not only in terms of discrimination but also in terms of the waste of resources that currently exist in Irish society, going unused because the qualifications of some African professionals are not recognised.

This interferes with the ability of Africans to build self-sufficient lives. Opportunities to gain appropriate employment according to qualifications and retraining will impact on living standards of African immigrants and enable them to choose a standard of living away from the ghettos. Acknowledging African professionalism as it presents itself, and making space for it, will confront stereotypes.

Where applicable there should be the opportunity for lateral entry into professional cadres such as the civil service.

5.4 Recommendations:

- Provision of accessible and expedient transition courses that will provide quickly and effectively whatever accreditation or retraining which may be necessary.
- Standardisation to determine and recognise professional and technical qualifications gained outside Ireland and the EU. This demands selecting criteria for accreditation and advice on top-up training where required.

6.0 AFRICAN REPRESENTATION

There is evidence that the African sector has initiated, and is developing, entrepreneurship, contributing to its own and other communities.

With this accumulating experience, the African sector is examining its current avenues for more direct representation within the Irish public and private areas.

It is growing into a position where its knowledge and influence, particularly in the area of racism, becomes a valuable resource for institutions that have a serious intent on challenging racism.

This African resource of knowledge and influence needs to be recognised, facilitated and invited into the mainstream of public policy making and practice.

This may eventually extend to participation in the Irish political system as voters, candidates, councillors and Dail representatives.

6.1 Recommendations:

The establishment of a national, independent and securely funded body to:

Monitor and evaluate the implementation of the National Action Plan against Racism;

Conduct research, and make publicly available, current and accurate data regarding and including the evaluation of the experiences of, and responses to, racism in Ireland;

Receive and advocate on behalf of those groups and individuals reporting complaints and seeking advice or assistance which they are otherwise unable to gather on their own;

Independently evaluate existing organisations, policies and initiatives, associated with and relevant to anti-racism, anti-discrimination and interculturalism in terms of their remits and effectiveness, and in order to identify gaps in the Government's current responses to racism as noted in Chapter 5 of its Discussion Document on the National Action Plan against Racism;

- To develop a more effective consultative approach to issues and relations with ethnic communities in Ireland, taking into consideration, and implementing, the recommendations with respect to developing African communities and representation stated above;
- To regularly review the content and expression of racism where attacks occur;
- To lobby for effective responses to anti-social behaviour of young people in Ireland which both fuel incidents of racism and confuse the exact nature of physical and verbal attack;
- To emphasise the remit and implementation of the Incitement to Hatred Act in a manner that protects but directs the appropriateness of free speech.

