

Africans In Ireland: Developing Communities

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Africans and Ireland

Ireland's Connections with Africa

The connections between Ireland and Africa have long been maintained in a singular direction and form as missionary aid sent from Ireland to African countries. From long before the days of the notorious little red box with the carved image of a Black child, that so many recall as the 'pennies for the black babies' collection, Ireland has sent economic and human resources south to Africa. Irish religious and lay missionaries continue to play key development aid and crisis response roles in many African nations. Apart from the missionary organisations, other Irish agencies are involved in development work in Africa. The Irish government, through Irish Aid, under the auspices of the Department of Foreign Affairs, contributes to the development process in Africa and other parts of the 'developing world'. All the priority countries, i.e. those countries that receive special attention when Irish aid is being disbursed and with whom there are special bilateral arrangements on a government-to-government basis, are in Africa.¹ The involvement of Irish troops in peace-keeping activities around the world, such as the work of Irish troops in the Congo in the 1960s is well-documented, as is Irish humanitarian work in Africa, in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide.

Even in the leanest of economic times the Irish population, from the youngest school children to those existing on meagre pensions, has made generous financial contributions to various fundraising campaigns on behalf of Africa. The Irish at home have responded and continue to react to the images of poverty, strife, famine, disease and misery, which they have learned to associate with Africa and Africans. Unfortunately, while such images and efforts may have been driven by the best of intentions, one result has been the unintentional indoctrination of a nation with a set of negative stereotypes and generalisations about the people from an entire continent of many separate nations. A direct negative impact of this process is not being experienced on Ireland's streets, as well as in both national and local policies and services in an alarming way. As many more Africans come to make a new home in Ireland, they are becoming victims to racism, discrimination and xenophobia in a variety of forms.

Africans in Ireland

¹ De Breadun, Deaglan. 2000. "Ireland has no Excuse to Break its Promise on Modest Aid Target". *Irish Times*. September 09.

Significant numbers of Africans have been reported in Ireland from as early as the 18th century, according to the research of Dr William Hart, of the University of Ulster.² At that time many would have been slaves, runaway slaves or members of various armed forces, though some would seem to have been wealthy Africans accompanied by their servants. No records exist as to exact numbers of Africans in Ireland from the 18th Century or since but the reasons for Africans coming to Ireland do seem to have shifted and changed over time. In more recent times, Africans in Ireland have primarily been students or specialist workers, such as nurses and doctors. Most of these would have come from reasonably affluent backgrounds and would have been generally well accepted into Irish society, largely due to their small numbers and the temporary nature of their stay here.

The 1984 census statistics suggest that at the time there were about 20,000 ‘Asian and Black’ immigrants in the country – less than 0.6% of the population.³ The past ten years or so, however, have seen another change in the migration trends of Africans in Ireland. Simultaneous increases in political, social, religious, ethnic, and natural crises in many African countries, Irish economic stability, and growth of international participation by Ireland, have contributed to an increase in the numbers of African immigrants to our shores. Immigrants now come for a much wider variety of reasons than in the past. In addition to the traditional students and doctors, we have growing numbers of African clergy, coming to fill gaps left by reduced numbers of Irish clergy,⁴ African spouses of returned immigrants and development aid workers, and of course, the currently high-profile category of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Theoretical Frameworks and Models

A wide range of theoretical frameworks and models were used to inform and guide both the content and the direction of this study. These include theories on cultural adaptation, culture shock, intercultural and intergroup relations, motivational psychology and community development theories, with particular attention to the issue of social exclusion.

Cultural Adaptation

The broad concept of cultural adaptation can incorporate a range of responses by immigrants to their culturally unfamiliar surroundings. Cultural accommodation, assimilation and integration, terms sometimes used interchangeably, are different individual responses characterised by differing levels of abandonment of the culture of origin. Assimilation involves completely embracing the new culture while discarding all

² Hart, William. 1995. *Blue Men and Black Men: The Presence of Africans in Ireland 1550-1950*. (Unpublished paper delivered at a meeting of the African Cultural Project). ACP: Dublin.

³ Forbes, Ian & Mead, Geoffrey. 1992. “Measure to Measure: Comparative Analysis of Measures to Combat Racial Discrimination in the Member Countries of the European Community”. Equal Opportunities Studies Group: University of Southampton.

⁴ Zachary, Gregg. 2000. “Parish the Thought: A Nigerian Priest Finds an Irish Home”. *The Wall Street Journal*. (US Edition). 11 May.

significant aspects of the culture of origin. Integration also involves significant adoption of the new culture but seeks to integrate the new and the old cultures so that some aspect of the former personal, cultural identity remains intact. Accommodation places emphasis on learning how to function in the new culture through learning the appropriate rules and socio-cultural skills while maintaining one's original cultural identity and salient characteristics. Each immigrant chooses (intentionally or otherwise) accommodation, assimilation or integration as an adjustment strategy. Their choice and its effectiveness is dependent on a variety of factors including the existence of a support system from their culture of origin and the expectations and policies of the host culture in terms of cultural adaptation of immigrants

As Ireland struggles to come to terms with a new trend of immigration, policy-makers have yet to agree on a long-term comprehensive strategy for the inclusion of immigrants to Irish society. A variety of approaches, from encouraging cultural diversity and inclusion, to dispersal and 'integration' projects have been initiated, but a unified philosophy remains unidentified. At first glance, assimilation policies present the most attractive approach, reducing the need to accommodate differences by absorbing immigrants and facilitating their complete adjustment into Irish culture and society. There are two important problems with such an approach. The first is that assimilation policies are inherently ethnocentric and/or racist, implying that the host and dominant culture is superior to the cultures of minority immigrants.⁵ The second problem is that where immigrants remain visibly distinct from hosts, full assimilation is impossible because they will be identified as foreign and different, regardless of how much they culturally assimilate in terms of values and behaviours.

A range of models has emerged over time to explain and anticipate the various aspects of cultural adaptation. Some of these include pseudo-medical models, clinical models, and U-curve adjustment models (identifying set stages through which immigrants are expected to progress over time in a new culture). Newer models embrace all of these components while noting that the process of exposure while noting that the process of exposure to a new culture and the consequent cultural adaptation is more like a long-term learning experience.⁶ How the learning of the new culture progresses is dependent on a number of factors relative to both the immigrant and to the host environment.

Immigrants experience recurring periods of culture fatigue from the constant effort to understand and behave according to a completely new set of cultural and social rules. An ethnic or cultural community offers a retreat, somewhere to behave in a manner more culturally familiar, and a source of information and support for efforts at adaptation. Two of the most important factors in the successful learning of and adaptation to a new culture are language acquisition and the development of close links with members of the host culture who can act as cultural informants, friends and mediators during the learning process.⁷ Both of these factors are influenced by experiences of culture shock and isolation, making the process of adaptation complicated and challenging.

⁵ Furnham, Adrian & Bochner, Stephen. 1986. *Culture Shock*. New York: Routledge.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ibid.

Culture Shock

Without the existence of communities for African immigrants the process of overall adaptation is made much more difficult. The literature regarding adaptation of immigrants to culturally different host societies clearly indicates that they experience a variety of challenges.⁸ These include not only the obvious difficulties in communication and relationship-building with members of the host culture, but also a wide range of potential physical, emotional and perceived mental health problems.

The Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP) has identified many of these in their information pack on asylum seekers and refugees. They inform immigrants and those working with them to watch for signs of strain arising out of the effort required in making the necessary adaptations in a new and strange country and a sense of loss and deprivation arising from the restricted ability to find out vital information. Differences in physical and linguistic characteristics which lead to standing out from the host population as well as a loss of identity ('somebody' becomes 'nobody' particularly when being questioned, searched or viewed as suspect) are also to be expected. The emergence of a false sense of superiority within the host population arising from patriotic feelings, distrust and anxiety is mentioned as an issue to be aware of. (ICJP, 2000).

Culture shock and the adaptation process have been linked to psychological difficulties and mental health concerns. Culturally different definitions of mental health and illness can, however, sometimes explain such an emphasis on these concerns for immigrants, where 'different' behaviours, dress and rules for interpersonal interactions can be mistaken for emotional or mental disorders.⁹ Where immigrants have experienced trauma, as is often the case with refugees, psychological manifestations can include flashbacks, hyper-arousal, physical symptoms, anxiety reactions, sadness, depression and avoidance. Just as each distinct culture defines mental health and illness in its own way, 'every culture has its own remedies for traumatic experiences and its own coping strategies for mental health concerns. Psychological and psychiatric models of intervention suitable for Western culture may not only seem strange but may be highly inappropriate for other cultures'. Such approaches, 'if used without the necessary cultural adaptation and sensitivity can cause more harm than good'.¹⁰

For successful adaptation of immigrant groups to occur in a host society, the natural development of ethnic enclaves or communities is important. Such enclaves offer needed

⁸ Amir, Yehuda. 1969. "Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations". *Psychological Bulletin*. Vol. 71. No. 5.; Furnham, Adrian & Bochner, Stephen. 1986. *Culture Shock*. New York: Routledge; Helman, Cecil. 1990. *Culture, Health and Illness*. London: Wright; Phelan, Brian. 1992. *The Experience of Muslims in Dublin*. (Unpublished thesis). Maynooth: St Patrick's College; Stephan, Walter, G. & Stephan, Cookie White. 1996. *Intergroup Relations*. USA: Westview Press; MacGreil. 1996. *Prejudice in Ireland Revisited*. Maynooth: Survey and Research Unit, St Patrick's College; Irish Council for Civil Liberties Women's Committee. 2000. *Women and the Refugee Experience: Towards a Statement of Best Practice*. Dublin: ICCL.

⁹ Furnham & Bochner, 1986.

¹⁰ Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. 2000. *Asylum Seeker/Refugee Information Pack*. ICJP: Dublin.

support to immigrant group members, reducing their sense of social exclusion and isolation. Indeed, research has shown that where individuals are isolated in the host community there are greater rates of breakdown, with loneliness and exhaustion as key factors. Conversely where communities of immigrants exist there also tends to be lower rates of mental health problems reported¹¹, possibly in part due to the availability of culturally appropriate mechanisms for addressing such problems as well as the existence of a fundamental support system.

Inter-Ethnic Group Contact

When considering the trend towards greater cultural diversity in Irish society, not just in Dublin, but throughout the country, the issues involved in facilitating greater adaptation of immigrants and host communities to each other must be acknowledged and considered. Three theoretical perspectives offer some suggestions on how effective intergroup contact might be achieved.

Contact theory is the first of these and it states that when members of different groups interact with each other under favourable conditions then prejudice and intergroup conflict will reduce. In practice, however, contact between groups can reinforce stereotypes and distrust unless the contact is structured according to the following criteria:

- 1) Group members are of equal status to each other.
- 2) Both groups are mutually motivated to co-operation and interdependence while being committed to a common goal.
- 3) External authorities encourage and support friendly interactions between hosts and minorities.
- 4) The interactions actively work to disconfirm existing and prevailing stereotypes.¹²

Social Identity Theory suggests that ethnocentrism is an unavoidable and omnipresent feature in intercultural group relations. As such, anti-racism and cultural awareness efforts should form part of the design and delivery of services and programs aimed at bringing culturally diverse groups together.

The third relevant theory is Realistic Group Conflict Theory, which proposes that intergroup hostility can arise from either real or perceived competition between the groups in question. The competition between the groups is generally for power and/or resources. Stereotypes and misconceptions feed distrust and misunderstanding between group members. In the context of this study, racism and xenophobia might be expected to emerge as key issues. It remains imperative, however, that cultural diversity remains

¹¹ Furnham & Bochner, 1986.

¹² Allport, Gordon. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. USA: Addison-Wesley; Amir, Yehuda. 1969. "Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations". *Psychological Bulletin*. Vol. 71. No. 5.; Tzeng, Oliver & Jackson, Jay. 1994. "Effects of Contact, Conflict and Social Identity on Inter-ethnic Group Hostilities". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. Vol. 18. No. 2. USA: Pergamon Press.

highlighted to facilitate understanding of the behavioural manifestations of inter-ethnic group conflict.

Although many voluntary, government and non-government bodies have reacted to anti-immigrant sentiment with funding, training, workshops and other anti-racism projects, the cultural diversity issue remains basically un-addressed. While it is essential to acknowledge the persistence of overt racism in Irish society, as long as the emphasis remains on the debate about racist acts and government policies, there will be avoidance of pro-active, long-term cultural adaptation strategies for an already culturally-diverse society.

The absence of identifiable African communities also means no leaders or spokespersons have emerged, as part of a culturally appropriate community development process, to link with host community leaders. Without these links there cannot be equality of interaction and the consequent understanding, co-operation and inclusion between immigrants and hosts. In terms of resulting social, political, cultural and economic exclusions experienced by such new groups of Irish citizens, we can expect little hope of such exclusions being addressed or rectified unless community development processes are created to meet the specific needs and expectations of specific immigrant groups, such as Africans.

Motivational Psychology

In the 1960s Abraham Maslow identified a hierarchy of needs which must be met by each person in order to facilitate full and complete personal and social development and functioning in society.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

Basic Needs – Physiological Needs (Food, water, air and shelter) & Psychological Needs (safety, security, order and stability)

Intermediate Needs – Esteem Needs (esteem and self respect) and Social Needs (love and belonging)

Meta Needs – Self Actualisation

Maslow suggested that each level must be met in sequence, starting with the lowest level (basic psychological needs) and onward up to the top of the pyramid (self-actualisation needs). Full participation in society, at both individual and community levels, requires the ability and resources to meet these various levels of human need. Current services available to Africans and immigrants in general tend to focus on the most basic physiological human needs identified by Maslow. In particular, this is true of services aimed at refugees and asylum seekers. Largely due to limited resources, the current offering of services is unable to address the higher needs of security, belonging, esteem or self-actualisation. Higher level needs are obviously relevant to the concept and

experience of community and therefore should be considered in relation to community development processes and projects.

Community Development and Social Exclusion

Definitions of community vary in the social science literature. Three definitions, which are generally accepted are: neighbourhood or geographical communities, communities of interest (such as lone parents), and ethnic communities (a group of people sharing cultural values and traditions who identify themselves as being part of an ethnic community or group). A general definition of a community is offered as “a population living in a local area and conducting overlapping and interdependent life activities that are perceived to bind the residents into a collective entity”.¹³

Key components of community are identified as a sense of mutuality, togetherness or belonging, joint responsibility, sharing history and a self-identity, realisation of common interests, and engaging in social interactions according to shared expectations, norms, values, aspirations, traditions, or culture.¹⁴

For Africans the idea of community is more complex and is reflected in the notion that an individual cannot exist or be defined outside the context in which he/she is related to others. Social cohesion is very important to Africans because they believe that the earliest act of civilisation was the establishment of a co-operative, interactive, human community.¹⁵ In essence, the centrepiece of all African cultures, and the African view of human kind, is found in the belief “I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”.¹⁶

Despite changes in numbers of African immigrants and their reasons for coming to Ireland, there has been little evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, to suggest African communities have developed in Ireland at any point in time. The diversity in countries and cultures of origin coupled with differences in economic, social and religious backgrounds, offers some explanation for the absence of African communities. Areas of the city where pockets of African immigrants are to be found are generally areas already socially and economically disadvantaged where local host communities struggle with issues of poverty and social exclusion. It is understandable that the arrival of a diverse immigrant population in these areas without structured support or preparation for either hosts or immigrants often serves to foster greater alienation, poverty and exclusion for both groups as they are forced to compete for resources.

Community development as an approach, seeks to empower members of a community to define development in their own terms and to participate in the process of community

¹³ Cotrell, L.S. 1976. “The Competent Community”, in Kaplan, B.H., Wilson, R.H. & Leighton, A.H. (eds.) *Further Explorations in Social Psychiatry*. New York: Basic Books.

¹⁴ Chetkov-Yanoov, B. 1986. “Participation as a Means to Community Co-operation”, in Levi, Yair & Litwin and Howard. *Community and Co-operatives in Participatory Development*. Gower.

¹⁵ Ojaide, Tanure. 1992. “Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity.” *African Studies Review*. Vol. 35. No. 3. December 1992: The African Studies Association.

¹⁶ Mbiti, John S. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann.

building. Community participation includes membership in community organisations, use of local resources to meet needs, advocacy on behalf of others, co-operation in community problem solving, as well as self-reliance, self-help and self-management within the community.¹⁷ Because empowerment cannot be facilitated without an understanding of differing perspectives and expectations, the differences between Irish and African definitions of community must be closely examined to inform community development projects aimed at Africans in Ireland.

Tom Ronayne noted that it is important to examine how policies “both implicitly and explicitly conceptualise what they variously term the community, the neighbourhood, or the locality, and perhaps more importantly, how they view the role and effectiveness of action taken at such levels”.¹⁸ In particular, it is important to consider areas where concepts of community and specific methods of community participation differ between African immigrants and Irish policy positions, to avoid further exclusion prompted by a demand or expectation to conform to Irish cultural expectations and processes.

The sustainability of any community development project requires the participation of those who use the services provided by the project. If Africans and other ethnic minority communities in Ireland are to participate fully in any community development project, policy makers and service providers must take steps to ensure effective and culturally sensitive consultations with ethnic minorities. Davies and Ohri¹⁹ identified a variety of reasons for providers to set consultations with ethnic minority communities using their services including:

- Redressing the racial imbalance at member and officer level.
- Overcoming cultural and religious barriers in service delivery
- Empowering those who are users of the services.
- Informing people about the range of service provision.
- Assisting policy development and service delivery monitoring.
- Breaking down barriers between authorities and ethnic minorities.

For such consultations to be effective they must pay more than lip service to the idea of minority participation. There are many forms of participation possible for providers to embrace. Davies and Ohri present their ‘ladder of participation’ as an instrument by which community development projects, and other service providers serving ethnic minority groups, can measure their performance relative to consultation and participation. The ultimate aim of community development projects is to ensure that project beneficiaries share decisions with policy-makers and/or service providers. This approach seeks to ensure effective use of resources as well as reducing social exclusion of minorities.

¹⁷ Greenberg, M. 1974. “The Concept of Community.” *Social Work*. Vol. 19. 1974. Levi, Yair and Litwin, Howard. 1986. *Community and Co-operatives in Participatory Development*. Gower.

¹⁸ Ronayne, Tom. 1988. *Coping with Social and Economic Change at Neighbourhood Level: Literature Review, Model and Research Questions*. Report to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions: Dublin.

¹⁹ Davies, Wendy & Ohri, Ashok. 1996. *Race Equality Manual: Practical Guide for Decision Makers*.

Research objectives

The African Cultural Project commissioned this research project to establish the following:

- Do Africans in Ireland experience a sense of community belonging and what does 'community' mean for Africans?
- What barriers exist (if any) which prevent the development of, and participation in communities for African immigrants?
- What kinds of resources do Africans identify as necessary to support their communities and develop a sense of social inclusion in Irish society.

Research Findings

In considering the three main questions prompting this study we find first that Africans in Dublin do not experience a sense of community belonging, in African terms. The essence of African community is expressed in terms of kinship and shared mutual responsibility for each other and is developed through a complex mix of communal interactions and relationships. Those who have lived in Ireland for many years, and particularly those who have married Irish spouses, have created and accepted into general Irish communities, but these differ from the kinds of community they would experience in their country of origin. Their friendship networks often consist of Irish and African friends and possibly immigrants from other countries also.

Newer arrivals, and those who are single or who have African spouses, do not experience a sense of belonging to an Irish community. For this group as well as other recent arrivals, the absence of a kinship or family network is a significant barrier to connecting with other Africans in the development of communities. It is interesting to note that while those involved in this study at each level agreed that African communities do not exist in Ireland, there does appear to be an effective African network in place. This network provides some support and solidarity for immigrants, particularly those newly arrived, but it has not developed further into a distinct community.

The second question we sought to examine was what barriers hamper the development of African communities. These include the geographic dispersal of Africans, language and cultural differences between African groups and between Africans and Irish, racism and xenophobia, and the income and legal status differences between long-term African immigrants and new arrivals. In addition, the absence of facilities and funding for co-ordinated community development activities and lack of appropriate childcare services foster social exclusion rather than community development. In terms of the participation of Africans in Irish communities the additional challenges of racism, xenophobia, cultural and communication style differences, and perceived Irish formality presented barriers for Africans who wish to feel either empowered or welcome in participating in such communities.

Recommendations

Policy makers and particularly those responsible for resources aimed at families and communities should not minimise or discount the importance of differences between mainstream Irish definitions of family and those of African or other minority ethnic groups in Ireland.

Service providers working with Africans and other ethnic minorities need to examine the most effective and culturally appropriate means of encouraging and facilitating participation and utilisation of services.

Efforts aimed at community building must be mindful of the diversity both among Africans and between Africans and other ethnic groups in Ireland as this diversity of culture, socio-economic status, religion, and circumstances impacts on the tools available to each group for participation in community development efforts.

When setting up programs aimed at Africans and other groups of immigrants efforts should be made to ensure that the beneficiaries have a sense of involvement as well as being willing and interested in participating in the schemes.

Cultural Adaptation and Language Acquisition

English language classes and information on adapting to Irish culture, if made available and accessible, would greatly facilitate a smooth transition for immigrants in adapting to living in Ireland.

Intercultural and cross-cultural services and activities, especially in areas with large numbers of immigrants, would enhance the development of positive relationships and inter-community co-operation between immigrants and host communities. Such efforts should be encouraged and supported.

Efforts should be made to facilitate interaction between those seeking asylum and members of the host population without the fear of this interaction being used against them in their asylum application process.

Childcare

Availability of and access to affordable childcare facilities are paramount to successful integration of immigrants (particularly women). Service providers working to facilitate the integration and adaptation of immigrants into Irish society should maintain a focus on childcare as a top priority.

Education and training for childcare workers should include an intercultural component to assist workers in understanding cultural differences in relation to family and childcare expectations between different groups.

Efforts should be made to recruit greater numbers of ethnic minority child care workers especially in culturally diverse local communities.

Gender

Any initiative directed at ethnic minorities must maintain sensitivity to culturally defined gender issues relevant to specific groups.

Housing

As a matter of urgency, measures must be taken to address racism and discrimination in the rented accommodation sector

Health

Intercultural and cross-cultural training should be available to medical and para-medical professionals and trainees. This training should include information on cultural differences in relation to concepts of health, wellness, illness and death as well as the development of a general understanding of culturally defined roles for health provider, patient and family, all of which can influence patient-participation and follow-up with health services.

Racism and discrimination

While anti-racism legislative instruments are important, effort should also be devoted to encouraging and organising intercultural and multi-cultural activities to foster mental cultural awareness and understanding between ethnic group members in Irish society.

Services must be provided to help adults and children cope with the racism and discrimination they experience in Ireland.

Immigration

In addition to training already provided for members of the Garda Síochána, anti-racism and intercultural relations training should be provided for immigration officials, given the specific circumstances they encounter working with culturally diverse individuals in potentially high-stress contexts.

Community

The definition of community used by policy makers should take into consideration differences in concepts of community and methods of community participation between culturally diverse groups in Irish society. This is necessary to avoid further exclusion prompted by a demand to conform to Irish cultural expectations and processes.

Service providers working with Africans and other ethnic minorities should ensure those using their services play an active role in the planning, implementation, delivery and evaluation of those services.

In conclusion, the kinds of resources identified for community development and participation of Africans were varied but highly consistent with those identified by various African solidarity groups and individuals for some time. Needed resources can be grouped into three general categories:

- 1) African social and cultural activities, such as music, dancing, and food festivals.
- 2) Provision of facilities to accommodate the largely informal and impromptu style of African social gatherings.
- 3) Development of anti-racism and education programmes and services to address negative stereotypes about Africans in Irish society and their impact on African adults and children.

There was also a strong desire by respondents in the study that any resources and facilities should be open and inclusive of non-Africans, particularly Irish participants to generate greater understanding and relationship building in the wider community sense. The question remaining is whether the courage and strength exist to do more than pay lip service to the ideals of a truly inclusive society.