

Integration at What Cost? Research into What Refugees Have to Say About the Integration Process*

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When refugees leave their country they are frequently assumed to be prepared to forgo their culture and history and embrace that of the receiving country. Scant attention is paid to the trauma caused by expecting or implicitly forcing refugees to shut the door on their former life in embracing a new alternative. This paper looks at the research carried out by the IntegraRef project which aimed to develop an understanding of refugee integration from a range of different perspectives. The main purpose of the research was to gain some insight into how local stakeholders, refugees/asylum seekers and those with subsidiary protection, and host communities themselves, perceive the phenomenon of integration, and what they see as evidence of its achievement. Although there were a number of difficulties in accessing information, the overall results seem to indicate a clear expectation that refugees are to assimilate into the host community wherever possible. Where this is not feasible, because of issues such as skin colour, language and religion, the refugees, service providers and local population affirmed that problems ensue. This paper seeks to report the perceptions described in the project by highlighting the way such perceptions frequently run parallel to each other and rarely cross. Responses showed how people could easily live alongside one another having no idea of the aspirations and hopes of others. Finally, while the need to integrate may be vital to a minority of refugees, it should not stand as a requirement for all. The conclusion invites states to consider alternative options when entering into the integration discourse.

The concept of integration as a kind of “forced assimilation” that violates some fundamental rights is rarely examined, as most literature seems to premise that integration is a value to be treasured and promoted (Farrugia 2008b).

* Based on research carried out under the auspices of the European Refugee Fund (ERF) and coordinated by the International Organization for Migration (Farrugia 2008a).

The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council has declared:

The failure of an individual Member State to develop and implement a successful integration policy can have in different ways adverse implications for other Member States and the European Union. For instance, this can have an impact on the economy and the participation in the labour market, it can undermine the respect for human rights and the commitment to Europe fulfilling its international obligations to refugees and others in need of international protection, and it can breed alienation and tensions within the society (Justice and Home Affairs Council 2004).

Meanwhile, across Europe, asylum seekers are increasingly being locked up in detention, prevented from making their asylum claim in the country most conducive to their eventual integration and excluded from language classes, vocational training and the labour market.

For centuries, refugees have enriched Europe culturally, economically and socially. Yet, today's systematic social exclusion of asylum seekers fuels racial tensions, leaves vulnerable people isolated and risks alienating future citizens. If ministers were serious when they declared integration to be a two-way process, they now need to shift their focus from the newcomers and take action to build inclusive societies that welcome refugees (ECRE 2007).

Whether such strategies result in spurring discrimination against migrants rather than their inclusion in society remains a moot point. Meanwhile, the EU Commission has established a set of Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU (ECRE 2007).

1. Integration

Literature on refugee integration reflects a wide range of differing roles and perspectives on the issue (Chrissanthaki and Østby 1997). Such an approach allows a broad thematic analysis of common features of integration definitions – and areas of controversy regarding such definitions. However, only a small proportion of the available literature explicitly attempts to provide a specific definition of refugee integration (Castles et al. 2002).

1.1. Definitions

Integration is defined and described in relation to the complex participation of the immigrant in more-or-less organised and also institutionalised fields of social, economic, occupational, residential and communicative systems of social action in the host society.

Full integration into the host society, for example, implies a state of complete similarity between immigrants and native people in their participation in the socially regulated distribution of valuable resources (Diaz 1995: 202).

This definition is influenced by Bernard (1986) and also by Scandinavian researchers who find that integration is the immigrants' adaptation to the

institutions, norms and culture of the “majority society” to the extent necessary for the group’s members to function in the society, while at the same time keeping intact its own ethnic identity (Alund and Schierup 1993: 439–41).

It has been said that early integration based on equal treatment and the prohibition of discrimination is in the best interests of both migrants and of the community in which they live (Grant 2005). The degree of integration depends on a number of factors. These include language, the availability of work generating sufficient income, legal status, participation in civil and political life, access to social services, family reunion, and access to citizenship through naturalisation. Human rights play an important role in the integration process and, conversely, where migrants, whether regular or irregular, are excluded from rights – for example from social services which protect social and economic rights – this contributes to their marginalisation, and also fuels negative attitudes towards them from the local people. Respect for the basic human rights of all persons in each society is also an essential basis for addressing and resolving the tensions and potential conflicts between people who have different interests and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Integration raises a number of difficult policy questions. Should migrants be required to assimilate and how far should diversity of cultures and values be recognised in host countries? Does formal integration lead to assimilation of values, in the case – for example – of Islamic communities in Western European countries? How should a migrant’s duty to respect the cultural identity of the host state be interpreted where there is a clash of values?

Integration is a two-way process involving adaptation by migrants to the host community, and the host community welcoming and adapting to the migrants. Well-planned integration policies are essential to social stability and to protecting the rights and dignity of migrants. UNDP’s 2007/2008 *Human Development Report* recommends three policy principles: respect diversity, recognise multiple identities, and build common bonds of belonging to the local community (UNDP 2007).

A central issue in integration studies has been the attempt to identify a set of factors explaining progressive, regressive, or stable patterns in the process of integration of immigrants in the host society (Berg 1997). In this context, it is pertinent to ask whether the most important factors are individual motivation, social or economic background, or language abilities. Perhaps the various conditions existing in the new environment might be the most important factors for explaining successful integration.

National policies often reflect different definitions of what is meant by “integration”. While the term itself means “joining parts (in)to an entity” its practical interpretation and social connotation may vary considerably: “assimilation” as well as “multicultural society” may be considered synonyms or descriptions of (successful) integration. Thus, all forms of cultural or social

behaviour ranging from completely giving up one's background to preserving unaltered patterns of behaviour are covered by the term of integration. This problem of definition, however, is that it has a bearing on measuring integration, because the requirements for success in assimilation are much more difficult to meet than requirements for multicultural coexistence in a society which remains indifferent to other people's rites or customs.

Whatever definition or concept of integration is applied, it can be agreed that the integration of migrants into their respective host societies has at least three basic dimensions concerning the social, economic and cultural role they play in their new environment (Werth et al. 1997). While these three dimensions are indisputably important fields of integration, a fourth dimension, the role migrants play in political life, very much depends on whether the host government allows political participation or even grants voting rights. The political dimension of integration is often rejected as irrelevant by states disliking the idea of granting political rights to migrants with a foreign passport.

1.2. Indicators of integration

As integration concerns complex phenomena and refers to a very widespread field, the evaluation of progress (or non-progress) in integration cannot be restricted to one single unit of measurement. There is no such thing as "one kilo of integration" or "five metres of integration" which would make comparisons over time and/or between two countries an easy task. We can only try to identify facts and phenomena giving an impression of the current social, economic, cultural and political role migrants play in a given society as well as changes occurring over time.

These indicators of integration can be selected from all four dimensions of integration. But in addition the host society is very important, because public opinion – although often measurable against marked scepticism – can for example give some indication of willingness to accept immigrants. Sometimes, violent attacks on foreigners are taken as an indicator against integration. While they are certainly an indicator for the xenophobic tendencies of a certain group of people, the question remains whether such people are representative of the entire society. On the other hand, they might be a small extremist fragment with opinions contrary to the mainstream. Much depends on the media portrayal of such incidents and their actual numbers and frequency.

Although identifying indicators of integration sounds simple in theory, the practical dimension makes it a very difficult task. Statistics on migrants are only very rarely available in the form, quality and exactness desirable. "They are not up to date or simply do not exist, because it would often be too difficult to gather the information" (Council of Europe 1997). Researchers can, for example, only find out about migrants' housing situation by carrying out an expensive survey among them, because the housing market is predominantly in private hands and

information on the nationality of the persons renting is simply not being gathered anywhere and is therefore not accessible.

Even where the necessary data are available, evaluating migrants' integration will continue to pose a major problem relating to reference data. This question touches on one of the core problems in the field – indicators alone do not mean much. In order to become meaningful they have to be compared over time and, more importantly, with reference to other sets of data.

Furthermore, although this is common practice, an additional question is whether it is really useful to compare the migrants' characteristics to those of the indigenous population. Is the average of the non-immigrant population really a good point of reference? Does this kind of comparison neglect central characteristics of the migrants and other important factors determining the indicator in question?¹

Finding a telling unit of measurement becomes even more difficult when assessing the degree of cultural integration. Apart from language skills, which are relatively easy to evaluate, it seems almost impossible to find indicators for cultural integration that everyone can agree with. The question of political integration is only slightly less complex. One frequently used indicator in this context is naturalisation. It is true that naturalisation does make a statement about an individual migrant's willingness to become an equal part of the new home country.² Here, the statistical basis is more or less reliable because naturalisation data are readily available. However, statements concerning the development of naturalisation rates over time or comparisons of naturalisation rates in various countries are of limited use when serving as indicators of integration (Bauböck et al. 2007).

When it comes to assessing the social integration of migrants the availability of data remains a major problem. Almost all relevant data are the result of small-scale surveys, if they exist at all. Binational friendships, housing or outer appearance (clothing, hairstyles) are as difficult to evaluate as leisure activities or social status within a certain group of people. Therefore, statements concerning the migrants' social integration are often limited to speculation.

1.3. Measuring integration

In these circumstances, it is debatable whether a set of indicators can be reliably identified pointing at progress in integration (or the need for further measurements) and covering all dimensions of integration at the same time in order to supply a complete impression of the state of integration in a given country (Hofinger 1997).

¹ This is highlighted by labour statistics: can the high unemployment rate among migrants in many European countries really be considered an indicator for lack of integration? Could it rather be an indicator for lack of qualifications? In other words, is unemployment due to poor integration efforts or to lack of skills?

² This is fundamental to the EU proposal for a future European asylum system. See European Commission (2007).

The destinies of immigrants are widely determined by national legal systems (Bauböck 1994). Legal integration is often perceived as a necessary condition for social integration. The systematic prolongation of legal differences between citizens of a state and immigrants reinforces social discrimination against the latter. Usually, empirical analyses of the integration of immigrants are based on demographic data and try to investigate the extent of social integration of immigrants (Coussey and Christiansen 1997). Studies that take the share of settled immigrants as an indicator for integration frequently neglect the legal impacts of a settlement permit. The granting of an unlimited residence permit may put the immigrant in a position close to a citizen of the country, but might reduce security by possibly revoking the permit in case of unemployment.

2. The IntegraRef project

2.1. Methodology

The IntegraRef project was a fifteen-month research study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Rome, the University of Malta Department of Civil Law, the Berlin Institute of Social Comparative Research (BIVS) in Germany and the Queen Margaret University Institute for International Health and Development (IIHD) of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom.

The project was led by the Psychosocial and Cultural Integration Unit of the IOM, jointly with the Central Service of the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees run by the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI), the municipalities of Rome, Turin, Venice, Sessa Aurunca and Syracuse for Italy. It also brought together the work of the European Refugee Fund (ERF) projects in twenty-four EU Member States. The project was made possible through funding within the framework of the European Commission, ERF Community Actions.

The research aimed to develop an understanding of refugee integration in the local context from a range of different perspectives in selected EU countries. It was set within a wider programme to develop indicators of integration for policy and practice carried out in collaboration with service providers and policy-makers. The main purpose of the research in the implementation phase was to gain some understanding of how local stakeholders, refugees/asylum seekers and those with subsidiary protection, and host communities themselves, perceive the phenomenon of integration, and what they see as evidence of its achievement.

2.2. Country teams

The research was carried out by three teams, one from each of the following EU states: Italy, Malta and Germany. Each team had a core area of research which employed the same methodological approaches and sample groups across each participating state. Coordination and consultancy was provided by Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, which had already completed a similar project (limited to

the UK) in 2004. The project highlighted a strong European dimension envisioned through a double partnership, the first limited to the four European countries (Germany, Italy, Malta, United Kingdom), the other embracing ERF national programmes of twenty-four EU Member States.³

3. The Maltese experience

3.1. Asylum policy and legal framework

Background

Malta is a small country in the EU with an area of just 122 square miles (316 km²) and a population of 402,700 (INTI 2007),⁴ located in the mid Mediterranean 93 km from Sicily and 290 km from the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. In the 1990s, 2,822 refugees came to Malta from Iraq and Yugoslavia and 1,968 of them were resettled in Australia, Canada and the United States. Very few were given Maltese citizenship. In recent years there has been a marked increase in irregular migration flows, stemming mainly from North Africa, and Malta has been confronted with a steady influx of immigration and asylum seekers. This is also partly due to its exposed coastline and geographical position as Europe's southernmost point of entry (European Refugee Fund 2006).

In the context of migration, the government describes Malta as:

the smallest EU Member State, possessing very limited resources, and, to complicate matters, having one of the highest population densities in the world ... [Malta] cannot be expected to adequately address this complex and multifaceted problem having roots beyond its shores by itself ... The reality that our labour market can only absorb a small number of people on a yearly basis and accommodation and Open Centres built specifically for persons granted protection are under considerable strain to cater for the ever increasing numbers of people cannot be ignored (MJHA 2005).

Legal basis of asylum and refugee system

Malta has been a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees since 1971 and enacted its own Refugees Act in 2001 (Laws of Malta Chapter 420). Prior to 2001, asylum applications were heard by the UNHCR in Rome or through UNHCR's operating partner in Malta, the Malta Emigrants

³ Ministry of Internal Affairs, Austria; Fedasil, Belgium; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Cyprus; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Czech Republic; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Estonia; Ministry of Labour, Finland; Ministry of Labour, France; Federal Office for Migration and Asylum/Ministry of Internal Affairs, Germany; Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity, Greece; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Hungary; Agency for Reception and Integration, Ireland; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Latvia; Ministry of Social Security and Labour, Lithuania; Ministry of Family and Integration, Luxembourg; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Poland; Ministry of Labour, Portugal; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Slovakia; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Slovenia; Ministry of Labour, Spain; Migrationsverket, Sweden.

⁴ The population density of Malta is 3,000 per square mile, whereas in Australia and Canada it is 10 per square mile, and in Libya 7 per square mile.

Commission. Malta has also ratified the Dublin Convention (Council of the European Union 2003).

The international obligations of Malta's asylum procedures are defined by the UN 1951 Convention and the New York Protocol of 1967, which Malta ratified in 1971. Until 1 January 2002, Malta applied the geographical reservation of Article 1B(1)a of the Geneva Convention, obtaining full national management of asylum seekers after this date. This reservation was lifted following accession to the EU.

The Immigration Act was implemented in 1970; the Refugees Act was enacted in 2000 and came into force on 1 October 2001, forming the basis of the rights and duties of asylum seekers, supplementing the Immigration Act. In December 2002, Malta decriminalised entrance without leave to its territory. However, the Immigration Act specifies that every migrant without leave – irregular or asylum seeker – should be detained on the basis of an administrative decision. The Act provides that any person on Maltese territory without the rights of entry, transit or residence shall be considered as a prohibited immigrant and therefore be detained “in some place” until deportation.

Amendments to the Refugee and Immigration Acts in August 2004 provided for an increase in the resources available to the decision-making bodies and for inmates of detention centres to submit a request for conditional release on grounds that continued detention would be “unreasonable as regards duration or because there is no reasonable prospect of deportation within a reasonable time”. Undocumented asylum seekers are also treated as prohibited migrants as the Refugees Act does not exonerate them from such detention. At the time of the project, the detention period had been reduced to a maximum of twelve months.

In the first seven months of 2007, the Refugee Commission had registered 1,072 arrivals. The majority of people originated from Somalia (351), Eritrea (162) and Ethiopia (106). The rest of the asylum seekers were mainly from other sub-Saharan African countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria (RefCom Statistics 2007). There are three types of irregular immigrant: those who enter the country legally but remain beyond their authorised stay, those who arrive in Malta without proper documentation, and those who arrive in an irregular manner (usually by boat). Most of these immigrants eventually apply for refugee status.

An irregular immigrant must lodge an application for refugee status within two months of arrival in Malta. The Commissioner may, only for special and exceptional reasons, consider valid an application made after this lapse of time. The Refugees Act states that asylum seekers should be interviewed within a week of their application. An administrative measure has been put in place in order to circumvent this procedural issue. The first form filled in by the asylum seeker is considered only as an ‘indication of their intention to apply for asylum’ and not the proper Asylum Application. Once this application is handed in to the

Commissioner's office, the detainee enjoys all the protection that the law provides to asylum seekers. It is only when asylum seekers are actually called for interview that they are requested to fill in the Preliminary Questionnaire.

Applicants in fact may be interviewed weeks or even months after they have filled in the first "application". Asylum seekers very often complete this application, issued only in English, on their own. Those who have no knowledge of the language very often have to rely on a fellow detainee or NGO personnel visiting detention centres to help them. Variances of information or inaccuracies between the two applications have been viewed by the Refugee Commissioner as untruths.

National law makes no provision for the material reception conditions of asylum seekers. Under article 10 of the Refugees Act, they have a right to state education, training in Malta and medical services free of charge. Detainees should enjoy access to basic conditions, health services, and freedom of religion and customs in detention centres.

Article 8 of the Refugees Act provides for setting up the Office of the Refugee Commissioner, a first instance body, and the Refugee Appeals Board. The Immigration Officer is expected to inform those seeking asylum in Malta of their right to apply for refugee status and of the right to have legal assistance during all the phases of the asylum procedure. In practice, it is the NGOs visiting the detention centres that first explain the asylum process to detainees, provide information regarding their rights, and in particular, how to apply for asylum.

Detention is a matter of national policy, considered as an "administrative requirement in the interest of national security and public order" (MJHA/MFSS 2005). Responsibility for detention lies with the police, although the armed forces have shared this duty since 2002. At the time of the project, until August 2007 there were three detention centres in use: Hal Safi Detention Centre consisting of two warehouses and a supplementary block in which 567 persons were living, Hal Far Lyster Barracks Detention Centre consisting of an area with tents and another indoors with prison zones detaining 734 persons run by the army, and a smaller detention centre run by the police in Ta' Kandja (Médecins du Monde 2007).

Since 2004, the Immigration Act (Laws of Malta, Chapter 217) grants the right to review of the detention period. Minors, families⁵ and vulnerable persons⁶ are in principle not placed in detention centres although alternative accommodation is not always available.

In 2003, the Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Alvaro Gil-Robles, visited Malta and publicly noted that these detention centres are "totally inadequate" (Council of

⁵ The policy document defines families as spouses and their minor children.

⁶ Defined by the policy document as comprising elderly persons, persons with a disability, lactating mothers and pregnant women.

Europe 2004).⁷ In particular, he referred to the problem of overpopulation, lack of activities offered to migrants and inadequate sanitation in the detention centres. He compared the detention centres to a “microwave in summer and a fridge in winter” (ibid.: 6), noting that “the overall situation is all more shocking if compared ... to entirely acceptable conditions to be found in the Corradino Prison” (ibid.: 7). Conditions remain questionable.

The Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity (MFSS) is responsible for the social welfare of all irregular immigrants, including asylum seekers in the community, refugees and people granted Humanitarian Protection. An Inter-Ministerial Committee⁸ has been set up, through which the ministries involved in social welfare support are expected to collaborate. The MFSS, in order to help refugees and persons holding Humanitarian Protection status to integrate with the rest of society, is responsible for assisting them in four main areas: education and training, financial entitlements, accommodation and employment. The MFSS also hosts a monthly NGO Forum to facilitate an exchange of views and proposals. In 2004 the Minister for Justice and Home Affairs set up a Task Force composed of himself as chair, the Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity, the Commissioner of Police and two NGO representatives to draft a national immigration policy. The drafting group has been suspended since 2006.

Open Centres

Once asylum seekers are released from detention, they are allocated temporary accommodation in one of the Open Centres against presentation of documents issued by the Principal Immigration Officer and/or the Refugee Commissioner. The MFSS is responsible for the social welfare of all irregular immigrants, including asylum seekers in the community, refugees and people granted Humanitarian Protection. Such service provision is coordinated by its subsidiary, the Organization for the Integration and Welfare of Asylum Seekers (OIWAS).⁹

There is one main Open Centre in Marsa. At the time of the project it hosted nearly 800 people, mainly single men, from different nationalities, backgrounds and religions. The building is a former school, abandoned because of serious flooding and an environment of criminality, situated on the edge of the port with an industrial zone nearby and cut off from the main population. Another much smaller centre for families is at Hal Far, close to a detention centre, also in a remote part of the island. There are two hostels (housing up to fifteen) for unaccompanied minors, providing good-quality care and support.

⁷ The report refers to the situation in 2003. Today, the number of detainees living in these detention centres has increased considerably.

⁸ Representatives from the MJHA, MFSS, Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, Ministry of Health, Elderly and Community Care, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁹ Mission statement: “To provide social welfare services to irregular immigrants in order to help them meet their basic needs with dignity and respect and enhance their quality of life, to prioritize the most vulnerable cases, and assist their integration in to Maltese society where appropriate, in accordance with Government Policy”
(http://www.appogg.gov.mt/adultandfamily_refugeeservices.asp).

The Malta Emigrants and Refugees Commission, a Church NGO, runs two centres in Balzan housing approximately 300 people. One is for single men and another for single women with children, and families. These centres are in the heart of a prime residential area, close to all amenities and schools. The Emigrants Commission also provides accommodation in a number of apartments scattered all over the island.

4. Public perceptions

4.1. International appraisal of public perceptions

According to results from a poll taken by Eurobarometer in 2003, echoed by a survey on discrimination in the EU in 2006, Malta is one of just four countries where only a minority thinks that ethnic diversity enriches the national culture (31.7 per cent). The Maltese are consistently the least supportive of migrants' rights in the EU-27, whether polled about equal social rights, family reunion rights or facilitated naturalisation. Also the Maltese are the most supportive in the EU-25 of deporting all legally established third-country nationals (35 per cent), especially if they are unemployed (63.6 per cent). Over two-thirds of Maltese believe ethnic discrimination is fairly widespread and the majority thinks it worsened from 2001 to 2006. The population is divided over whether the country should do more to combat discrimination. Just 18.7 per cent were aware of a law punishing ethnic discrimination.

Key Findings listed in the MIPEX – an annual study of twenty-five EU countries and three non-EU countries, produced by a consortium of twenty-five universities, research institutes and think tanks – show that in Malta, citizens of other EU countries outnumber legally resident non-EU citizens at a rate of 2 to 1. The legal immigration of third-country nationals was just 1,913 in 2004. The government estimates that in 2005 about the same number came to Malta irregularly. Malta's growing asylum-seeker and refugee population is modest in raw numbers, but one of Europe's highest as a percentage of the population.¹⁰

Irregular migration flows and the law of the sea have fuelled rather alarmist media and public debates.¹¹ Malta recently introduced integration policies, largely aimed at refugees, mainly in response to the legal obligation to transpose EC Directives on anti-discrimination and long-term residence. The local press comments that

¹⁰ The population stood at 413,609 in December 2008 (National Statistics Office). At the beginning of October 2008, 2,500 irregular immigrants had landed in Malta during the previous nine months. During this time the number of births was just under 3,000.

¹¹ Camilleri (2007), quoting the Minister for Justice and Home Affairs at an EU summit on immigration "Let me make it clear to everyone. Malta will not allow itself to be anointed as the only sentinel of the EU's southern borders." Speaking to the international press following the meeting, Dr Borg said Malta was determined that, until a burden sharing agreement on the proportional distribution of asylum seekers or illegal immigrants is reached between EU member states, the island will not accept to take upon itself the responsibility of taking to its territory all the illegal immigrants saved in the Mediterranean.

“Malta appears reluctant to step up the pace of integration of immigrants into the workforce, with results that may be eroding the country’s competitiveness while at the same time encouraging illegal worker exploitation” (Vassallo 2007). Access to nationality is shown to rank 24th out of the 28 MIPEX countries, with only one country scoring worse than Malta on both labour market access and anti-discrimination. Political participation is the lowest-scoring strand for Malta, as for several other European countries. MIPEX graded Malta’s efforts to integrate foreign workers into the labour market at only 30/100: a statistic well below the EU average of 56.

4.2. Local appraisal

There have been sporadic attempts to address the integration issue. In 2007, the University of Malta’s Centre for Labour Studies (CLS) issued a memorandum urging local political parties to regularise the position of immigrant workers, among other measures aimed at improving competitiveness and addressing social injustice. The CLS memo observed that immigrant workers “are filling a gap in the supply side of labour” by taking on jobs unwanted by the Maltese. It also warned that the situation “may eventually create an underclass or a ghettoisation of relatively deprived persons”. The CLS concluded that “[t]he best solution may be to regularise their position by issuing temporary work permits to immigrants from third countries, or by letting them register as guest workers”. MIPEX also highlighted a general lack of specific infrastructure governing the entire integration process.

Malta’s integration policy is the responsibility of the MFSS, which runs a government agency, OIWAS, specifically for this purpose. In an interview in the local press (Vassallo 2007), the ministry’s communications coordinator defended Malta’s performance on the grounds that immigration is still a new phenomenon to which the country is gradually adapting.¹² The ministry spokesperson contends that efforts to integrate irregular immigrants after detention are often problematic for two reasons: because those who do not intend residing in Malta permanently are not particularly interested in legal employment, but only in saving up enough money for their next step; and because unscrupulous employers exploit the vulnerability of immigrants and do their utmost to evade the legal regime and employ immigrants illegally. This questions the dubious presumption that all immigrants wish to integrate.

4.3. Context of research and methodology

Given the small size of the island, Malta was treated as one local community. A preliminary hurdle concerned the status of the people to be interviewed. It has already been shown that in legal terms the position of the refugee is advantaged

¹² “In Malta’s case, we could say that we have just started discovering the roadmap for the first generation of integration policies as compared to other European countries which are dealing with third generation immigrants. It is a steep learning curve which we are embarking on whilst facing significant operational challenges.”

vis-à-vis the person with Humanitarian Protection status and that Malta has a very small number of refugees. It proved extremely difficult to track down refugees, mainly because they are not generally housed in Open Centres in receipt of ERF funding.¹³ Also they are invariably the first to benefit from resettlement and leave the country. For this reason, the research sample is predominantly composed of people with Humanitarian Protection. The term refugees in the text therefore loosely refers to those with some form of protection and excludes asylum seekers whose application has been rejected at appeal stage. Use of this term was eventually agreed by all national research teams, given their very different social and political contexts.

Interviews with people having Humanitarian Protection were held within two focus groups, one at Balzan and the other at Marsa Open Centre and in fourteen individual interviews. Women refused to be interviewed in the presence of men so did not participate in any focus group discussion (FGD) and only accepted to be interviewed separately. Two further focus group discussions were held: one with the host community and another with service providers.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner concentrating on a number of key issues such as employment, education/vocational training, language, health, social relationships (leisure, cultural differences), safety, property, worship and political participation. The focus group discussions proved an excellent way for people to engage in debate, highlighting a number of similarities and differences in outlook and opinion.¹⁴

5. Main findings relating to local integration

5.1. Safety and stability

Initial reception procedures, discriminatory behaviour and media influence can lead to refugees feeling unsafe. The refugees' need for safety is echoed throughout the interviews: "I always searched for a safe place" (refugee, Somalia). In the Marsa focus group with refugees, the participants mention that the feeling of insecurity that started in their country of origin has been with them throughout their journey and some still feel it in Malta. For example, refugees interviewed are scared to go out at night and they are simply afraid to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Others however do feel safe in the local communities where they now live. There have also been instances of conflict between different ethnic communities, particularly within the confines of detention and the overcrowding of some Open Centres.

Asylum seekers are also looking for a stable place to live and some shared the concern that they cannot integrate until they know they can stay in Malta. "If I have

¹³ The project was directed to beneficiaries of ERF funding.

¹⁴ However, it is important to point out at this stage that refugees are not a homogeneous group and it is difficult to represent them as using one voice.

refugee status I can live here in Malta, but [I] know I'm worried to go back to Somalia. That's made me hide in my hat" (individual interview, Somalia). It is pertinent to note that skin colour seems to be felt to directly affect safety and stability.¹⁵

5.2. Reception

Asylum seekers entering the country in an irregular manner were formerly detained for a maximum of eighteen months (now reduced to twelve months). This makes it obvious to the refugees that "they are not welcomed from day one" (FGD service providers). Once in detention they are handcuffed when leaving the centre, even to go to hospital. "It was very difficult, anyway it was very difficult for me. Because we spent the time under the tents, maybe for six, seven months under the tents, when the rain was falling under the tents" (individual interview).

One of the service providers confides: "It's a very jaundicing experience, influencing their integration prospective. Because they know that Maltese don't want them" (FGD service providers). A small number of asylum seekers, however, did not seem unduly troubled by a spell in detention and expressed their relief at being somewhere safe, no matter what the conditions might be. This raises the question as to the availability and quality of responses on offer relating to psycho-social issues within the reception phase (Balzan FGD refugees).

The general perception is also that most asylum seekers end up in Malta by chance and most, if not all, had no idea that Malta existed before landing on its shores (individual interviews). Their disappointment in not reaching mainland Europe through Italy is also telling. However this raises an argument central to this paper. Refugees indicated that when they sought protection, their country of choice was never Malta. A number had no intention of remaining in Malta and viewed it simply as a transit country.¹⁶ The state response is that it is therefore futile to invest in integration, as integration must be reciprocal. However a number of refugees are

¹⁵ In contrast to the position of black-skinned asylum seekers, Malta receives another group of refugees that service providers labelled as "invisible". They tend to be those refugees with white skin or those that overstay their visas. This groups tends to integrate better, they have Maltese friends, go out in the evening, go shopping in the same places as local people, go sight-seeing and go to the beach. One service provider comments: "They lead a normal life, they don't have issues, they're not very afraid to go anywhere." Service providers attribute this to the whiteness of their skin and because in most cases the local community mistakes them for tourists. However they still have issues with the temporariness of their status. "You still have the documents, you're reminded you're an outsider, you're not one of us" (FGD service providers). Service providers worry about the group that overstay their visas because they do not contact NGOs because of the fear that they will be reported to the police, hence they only have limited access to social services. This is corroborated by research carried out by Amore (2005) and Texeira (2006).

¹⁶ This is echoed in previous research by Farrugia (2006).

happy in Malta and want to settle permanently, notwithstanding their initial position.¹⁷

5.3. Status

The temporariness associated with the status that “refugees” are given, especially the Humanitarian Protection status which is renewable annually, is a factor that hinders integration. “They know they cannot ever get a permit (citizenship), they know it. And that for them is extremely frustrating. It causes great anxiety for them” (FGD service providers). The anxiety caused by the temporary status undermines the refugees’ sense of stability in the community.¹⁸ Service providers argue that it is not “according to human rights” for people to build social connections in their country of asylum, only to be sent away once the conflict is over. They feel that when planning integration policies, there is a need to focus on permanent solutions such as citizenship. In Malta refugees can apply for Maltese citizenship after ten years, but the grant is discretionary.¹⁹

5.4. Alienation

Refugees in Malta find it hard to settle, partly because in Malta there are no diverse ethnic communities. Therefore refugees might feel alienated when surrounded by people that have a different cultural heritage and language from them. A refugee from Somalia explains his feelings when he arrived in Malta; “... first time I was new in the society and it was very difficult and I was alone, the only person who was different.” This sense of alienation can be exacerbated by the unwelcoming reception methods, such as the period most have to spend in detention, discrimination, and negative media coverage.

5.5. Discrimination/racism

Service providers suggest that the Maltese fear integration because of misconceptions about refugees, citing the fear that the price of the property in their neighbourhood might be negatively affected. The local community group was unanimous in its concern about the threat to the jobs of local people and the general

¹⁷ The fact that they are precluded from moving on to another EU country because of Dublin II restrictions also strongly influences their choices.

¹⁸ INTI (EU funding programme promoting integration) National Meeting, “The Integration of Third Country Nationals”, Malta, 2007: Mr G from Somalia and who has Temporary Humanitarian Protection in Malta said that the Maltese are very kind, but that life for him and those like him here is very difficult and uncertain. “There is no future; it is like being in a dark room. It is difficult to know what is going to happen to you with Temporary Humanitarian Protection,” he said. “You have left your family behind, and you cannot bring them here, but also you cannot go there to be with them.” Living in an Open Centre for an indefinite time is difficult and as it is isolated from Maltese society it is difficult to integrate. Migrants have problems gathering information on Malta and their rights.

¹⁹ Ibid.: Mr M from Eritrea said that it is very hard to integrate with Temporary Humanitarian Protection as you only have the security of a one-year residence permit, which makes it impossible to make plans for education, work or housing. The primary issue is the law and the policy because if migrants are given refugee status this helps them with everything.

impact on their own place in the community. “Today a roadsweeper, tomorrow instead of me ...” and “At hospital we have to wait in a queue behind them. They eat and drink at our expense.” “Everywhere is full of them. Soon they will take over” (FGD local community).

5.6. *Media coverage*

Discriminatory behaviour and fear has been fuelled by media representation of refugees, which is counteractive to the process of integration. The service providers mentioned that the media often focus on negative aspects of immigration such as crime and disease. In the service providers focus group discussion there was a debate as to whether the media fuel discrimination or whether they are simply reflecting what society wants to hear.

The important point to note is that the refugees stated that they also read articles that are against them or not particularly welcoming. One most wonder what effect this might have on their desire to integrate into Maltese society. However most refugees seem to recognise that the Maltese population is diverse and not all are racist and against them, although their feelings of security may be shaken.

5.7. *Accommodation*

Private purchase or renting of housing is very expensive in Malta.

Housing in Malta is one of the major problems faced by both citizens and government. The number of households exceeds the number of dwellings available, at least at reasonable prices (Tabone 2001).

Refugees have the right to apply for social housing but must compete with locals on a lengthy waiting list. Those leaving detention are automatically given temporary shelter in an Open Centre but they must attempt to find a permanent solution to their housing needs. Rents are often prohibitive and, even where money is available, a number of property owners are reported to have been dismissive of any requests for rentals by immigrants. In the past, a number of North African males who had entered Malta legally were reported to be using the country as a base for criminal activity and this prejudice seems to have persisted indiscriminately.

Furthermore, the urgency of moving out of the Open Centre depends on a number of factors. Families are usually reasonably well accommodated and when they try to find private alternatives they receive substantial support. Single males in overcrowded centres may find it too much of a strain to remain there, however. Students trying to study find it impossible to live in such surroundings but are faced with equally impossible financial burdens if they leave. One interviewee explains that they are living with nine people in one bedroom but with a “beggars cannot be choosers” attitude he does not comment negatively on this. The interviews show that, in the main, refugees endure the direst situations as best they can, hoping to save enough money to leave Malta and travel to mainland Europe.

5.8. Employment

Some of the refugees feel destitute; they for example consider the bus fares in Malta expensive (a bus ride costs 47 euro cents). As one of the refugees interviewed said: “We have financial problems. We have escaped from our country to be in a better situation, but here we still are in a poor situation.” This financial hardship is due to the lack of access to well-paying jobs. Service providers comment that refugees are treated in a different way, working longer hours, and with no regular contract: “They are faced with a problem with having to accept working conditions and jobs that are most of the time not accepted by the local population.”

These temporary jobs add to the sense of instability in Malta. Service providers also point out that single parents find it very difficult to work because they cannot find suitable childcare. Refugees complain that often they do not find a job suitable to their qualifications, while a number of jobs are inaccessible to them owing to their lack of knowledge of Maltese. Other issues concern language and the recognition and certification of documents which some refugees produce to accompany their job application.

5.9. Education

Some of the refugees have participated in free courses offered by the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, part of the Ministry of Education, and others have followed courses offered by the Malta Institute of Computer Science. In addition, one of the refugees started a degree at the University of Malta but found it difficult to balance work and education. On the other hand, some of the refugees said that they do not want to stay in Malta because of the lack of educational opportunities.

Children are automatically entitled to free schooling but must first master Maltese in order to be able to successfully integrate (or at least communicate) with their classmates. For older students the language issue can be a serious handicap, although at tertiary level the teaching medium is English. A number of refugees undertake English language instruction so as to be able to follow the courses of study they wish to pursue.

Post-secondary education (school is compulsory until age 16) is not free to refugees but in practice university and college fees have been waived to encourage further education. However as there is no stipend or accompanying financial support, students must fund their living expenses through separate employment, which often proves extremely challenging.

5.10. Health

Besides lack of specialised care, refugees have problems in accessing health services due to culture differences and language barriers. The Balzan Open Centre, run by an NGO, has an arrangement with a local doctor who provides care free of

charge. The local hospital is used in case of emergency but feedback seems to show that the local public health centres are not frequented, although theoretically these are accessible.

“Life becomes very hard, from the first day that we get here we have to think about how to get a job, how to get money and cope with life” (Marsa FGD refugees). Mental health issues frequently go untreated although they are a concern. The difficulties that refugees encounter seem to further contribute towards their anxieties and therefore, to be able to integrate, refugees need their own coping strategies. One of the refugees mentioned that he puts a lot of effort into socialising and is careful how he acts around others. Others mentioned that ambition for a better life drives them forward. One interviewee said that he likes to go to Birzebbuga, which is where he first landed by boat and he likes to tell the story to his friends. The service providers mentioned the importance that refugees maintain hope that their situation will improve. However service providers point out that there is a lack of specialised care for those already traumatised from the experiences in their country of origin and the voyage to Europe, especially those who pass through Libya and detention in Malta

6. Social connections

A large part of integration comes about through the social connections that people are able to form. According to the *Indicators of Integration Framework* (Ager and Strang 2004) these types of social connection can be divided into social bonds, social bridges and social links (Tabone 2001).

6.1. Social bonds

Most of the refugees living in residential housing form strong social bonds among themselves. One interviewee in the focus group discussion held in the Balzan Open Centre stated: “We think that we are brothers”. Another said; “I have no problem inside, all the people know me, sometimes we consult each other, so they respect me and I respect them.” Once they live in the community they invite their friends over and sometimes they go out for lunch or dinner at the Marsa Open Centre where there are a few restaurants. Service providers mentioned that it would be beneficial for refugees to visit those in detention and share practical information about what they would need once they are released.

6.2. Social bridges

It seems to be difficult in Malta for refugees to form social bridges in the form of relationships with the host community. From those refugees interviewed, none participated in local events or local politics because, as mentioned previously, they do not feel welcome in the community and they prioritise work and education. Most have no contact with the Maltese local population and it would seem that more than half interviewed in the Marsa focus group discussion do not leave the centre unless they have to, for safety reasons.

Some mention that they would feel guilty to go out and have fun without their families (that are left behind) and so a refugee from Somalia spends his free time inside the centre. The few friendships made with Maltese people were through education or work, but they seem fragile and stop once the course or work ends.²⁰ Maltese colleagues at work sometimes invite them out for drinks and most refugees interviewed were not keen on drinking or were precluded from doing so by their religion. However they do read newspapers, some would even like to be involved in local politics, and they do receive letters from service providers such as the university and the local council.

Service providers say that Maltese people come to the centres to donate clothes and other things. The NGOs try to facilitate social bridging by providing tea at the centres so that people can see who they are donating to. But, as one service provider states: “Charity is good for what it is ... but very few Maltese willingly take an active step to help integration”. In terms of language barriers, the majority of Maltese can speak in Maltese and English, a few also speak French. Refugees that speak neither Maltese nor English have a serious communication problem. The great majority of Maltese are Roman Catholic. Refugees practising the same religion seem to find it easier to integrate than those with a different religion.

6.3. Social links

NGOs play a crucial role in helping refugees to build social links, i.e. links with institutions and government. At some of the residential homes, courses and advice are offered to refugees to prepare them for work and help them to integrate. The refugees are given information on education and work, and helped to access health care and make connections with the local population. Some refugees search for information on the internet on their own initiative, for example for courses on offer, before asking the relevant people for help. NGOs also help refugees with legal issues and some are comfortable enough to appeal against their status decisions and write letters of complaint, with the help of local lawyers working *pro bono*.

6.4. Plans

Family reunification

Besides the distant prospect of gaining citizenship, another major drawback for integration in Malta is the position relating to family reunification. Whereas refugees have the right to family reunification, persons with Humanitarian Protection status do not. Even for those who have the right, the procedure is unclear and costly. Both those with Humanitarian Protection and their service

²⁰ Ibid.: Mr A from Somalia with Temporary Humanitarian Protection said that there is a sense of fear between the migrant and host community in Malta but that this can be eased through the learning of the local languages, the achievement of the basic human needs and the interaction of cultures. These integration activities can begin in detention centres and can include sports, arts, festivals, education, training and interaction of people.

providers emphasise the importance of family reunification as a factor affecting integration. The refugees miss their families, and for some of them the family is the most important thing. As the service providers point out: “Refugees have a right to bring the family over, but nobody knows how to do it, no one in the government, nobody knows how to make it happen, because there are no procedures ... and they have to pay for it.”

Service providers also comment on the hardships that people face when they are separated from their families. Married women who arrive on their own feel they are losing time not being able to have children while married men on their own are anxious about their wives left alone, worried that they might want to start a new family back home. Some refugees even want to leave Malta in order to improve prospects of being reunited with their families. In contrast, those who are in Malta as a family view Malta and the Maltese in a much more favourable light and seem to be happier. A refugee from Somalia says he has friends in Malta that are also immigrants. One in particular has been in Malta five years and works and lives in a hotel. He fails to understand why immigrants are not happy in Malta: “I don’t know what they’re looking for.”²¹

Repatriation

Refugees have mixed views about wanting to stay in Malta or moving on to mainland Europe versus returning home. Most refugees do not want to go back home: “I don’t like going back to Somalia” (refugee, Somalia). His reason was the lack of safety and stability in his home country. Another refugee liked Malta because there is more respect for the individual, citing the example that people form a queue regardless of their gender and age.

Others want to go back as soon as it is safe: “It is not our intention to stay here or in Europe” (FGD refugees). There are also “those that want to go back to join their family back home ... who want to go back because they didn’t find anything good here ... and they don’t want to continue their journey” (FGD service providers). Some want to go back even if they have refugee status. “There was a case of a refugee who came as well and then decided to go back by himself because the process [of family reunification] was taking too much time for him” (FGD service providers). A service provider concludes: “... the people who want to go back, I would say that their integration process did not succeed.”

There are those who want to go to other European countries because of historical colonial ties and also because, as one refugee says: “I think there is no future in Malta.” They say that Malta is too small and lacks opportunity for them. Many refugees who do succeed in reaching other European countries are often sent back. This is a deterrent for those who want to increase their chances of well-being by moving to Europe. A refugee says that he is afraid to go to Europe only to be

²¹ It is worth pointing out that this particular refugee was never placed in detention, as he arrived in Malta as part of a family unit and was in an Open Centre from the outset.

forced back. In addition, refugees confide that they encounter problems receiving travel documents to visit family members in Europe. This can have an impact on their well-being, especially as it might stop them from travelling to be with family members or groups of the same ethnicity. But people such as the refugee from Somalia who arrived with his wife has no intention of leaving: “I am very happy and it’s very nice in Malta.” He finds the Maltese “very kind people, a very nice nation”. He thinks the fact that Maltese people are religious has an impact on their morality. “Malta is a religious country, so if the person has religion, he knows the wrong from the right. I would like to stay in Malta. I want to stay here in Malta and start my family here in Malta. I don’t like to go anywhere. I like the climate of Malta ... I really like the Maltese nation. That’s why I like to stay in Malta.”

7. Integration policy and recommendations

The lack of a clearly formulated integration policy remains an issue for concern. During the focus group discussion with service providers, the meaning of integration was based around equality of access to services. Refugees also think that there should be more emphasis on service provision rather than the current outlay on military services which provide for detention. It was felt that NGOs are making a huge contribution in Malta with regard to refugees but service providers complain that there are still no formal integration policies, leading to considerable confusion about service provision and responsibilities. This lack of knowledge frequently means that the services offered are subject to the individual provider and not always clearly identifiable to the refugee.

The issue of options relating to integration as a process were not addressed in the project. It seems that all those who participated assumed that integration was about being subsumed into the local culture and environment. Concerns focused on the inability of refugees to do just that, rather than exploring the possibility of retaining and sharing personal views, beliefs and culture. In the current context in Malta which has been delineated above, this is hardly surprising.

8. Conclusion

Research to further elicit the opinions of people seeking to integrate or be integrated is crucial if we are to gain any insight into the realities of the situation. The notion of cultural diversity, as promoted in UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, is rarely alluded to so that notions of retention of cultural identity are frowned upon by many, including some refugees who wish for nothing more than the anonymity that integration brings. Perhaps the time has come to truly acknowledge that we are enriched by cultural diversity and that the “one size fits all” approach does not work. Certainly from a human rights viewpoint there is no other option if human rights are to be protected.

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