

Don't cry sister, you have come to a good land and good people

Community Profile

Residents in Asylum Seekers Unit

Athlone Co. Westmeath

2010



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Community Development Practice

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The Real Costs of Exile



Mary, a Dinka refugee from Sudan currently living in Oulu, northern Finland. Here it's totally dark for several months each year and temperatures can fall to -35 degrees.

Frontispiece from *Human Cargo – A Journey among Refugees* – Catherine Moorhead ⁱ

'You shall leave behind all that you love
most dearly, and this is the arrow
that the bow of exile shoots first.

You shall find out how bitter
someone else's bread tastes,
and how hard is the way
up and down another's stairs.'

-- Dante, *Paradise* (Canto XVII, 55-60)

Summary

This report concerns the conditions and living standards among residents of the asylum seeker site in Lizzywollen, Athlone in January 2011.

Refugees are people who are outside their country of origin and unable to return due to well-founded fear of persecution.

Asylum seekers are people whose applications for recognition of refugee status is being investigated by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. They are required to live in allocated 'Direct Provision' sites in various places around the country.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees documents 35.5 million 'people of concern'. These are mainly refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and returning refugees. Most of them are in the developing world.

Due to the extreme differences in social and economic conditions between countries many people wish to emigrate to the European Union. As a result of the difficulty in coming by legitimate immigration methods some people attempt to use the asylum application process as an alternative 'backdoor' method.

Government is concerned about creating a 'pull' factor for unofficial immigrants and so make conditions for asylum seekers quite difficult. They are prohibited for working, running a business or doing 3rd level education. Adults receive a weekly allowance of €19:30.

In January 2011 there were 323 people in 87 family groups resident in 100 mobile homes on the Athlone site. This includes 195 children between the ages of 0 and 18 years. Children attend local primary and secondary schools.

The two main countries of origin are Nigeria and Pakistan. Main languages spoken are English, Russian and Urdu. Religions represented are approximately 65% Christian, 20% Moslem. Most people are between 3 and 6 years in the process.

Residents are excluded from community life by poverty, lack of language skills and prohibition of work.

The main refugee support group are New Horizon which provides education and befriending services and Harmon Community Development which runs the pre-school on site.

Residents are concerned about the asylum process, food, accommodation, health and employment issues. This report makes recommendation for improvements in these areas.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the help and assistance we have received in producing this report from:

- The residents of the asylum seeker unit in Lizzywollen Athlone
- The staff and management of the site
- New Horizon volunteers, particularly Margaret O Cluaid
- Harmony Community Development Project

Introduction

This is a joint project focusing on the residents of the Asylum Seekers Unit in Lizzywollen Athlone. Gerry Callaghan is the lead author for the sections dealing with international migration and the asylum process. Eman Mamood is the lead author for sections dealing with the conditions on the Athlone site.

It reviews the circumstances that lead people to attempt irregular migration to the European Union, the number of people of concern to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the asylum seeking process.

It further looks at the physical conditions of the Athlone site, the population demographics, the issues of most concern to the community and the various supports available to asylum seekers.

The title *Don't cry sister, you have come to a good land and good people* comes from a comment made by one asylum-seeking woman to another in one author's hearing in 2001.

Asylum-seekers are people whose application for recognition of refugee status is being processed under the 1996 Refugee act. This group of people experience significant and deep poverty. Uniquely among deprived groups in Ireland, this poverty is mandated and enforced by a government department.

Asylum seekers suffer an extreme form of social exclusion. The Combat Poverty Agency define social exclusion as being:

The process whereby certain groups are pushed to the margins of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, low education or inadequate life skills. This distances them from job, income and education opportunities as well as social and community networks. They have little access to power and decision-making bodies and little chance of influencing decisions or policies that affect them, and little chance of bettering their standard of living.ⁱⁱ

Asylum seekers in direct provision get accommodation, food, and a weekly allowance of €19:50 per week for an adult. There has been no increase in this allowance since 1999 when direct provision was first established.

Under the terms of their asylum application asylum-seekers are prohibited from working, running a business, attending third-level education or doing industrial training.

While processing speed has improved since the early days it still can take one year for an application from a non-priority country to be dealt with. Some families have been living on the Athlone site for over five years.

Direct provision directly fosters an extreme dependency culture. Boredom is a permanent and all-pervasive condition. Residents are physically, socially and economically isolated from the surrounding community leading to unfounded fears and mutual suspicions. This leads to depression, spouse and family abuse and mental illness.

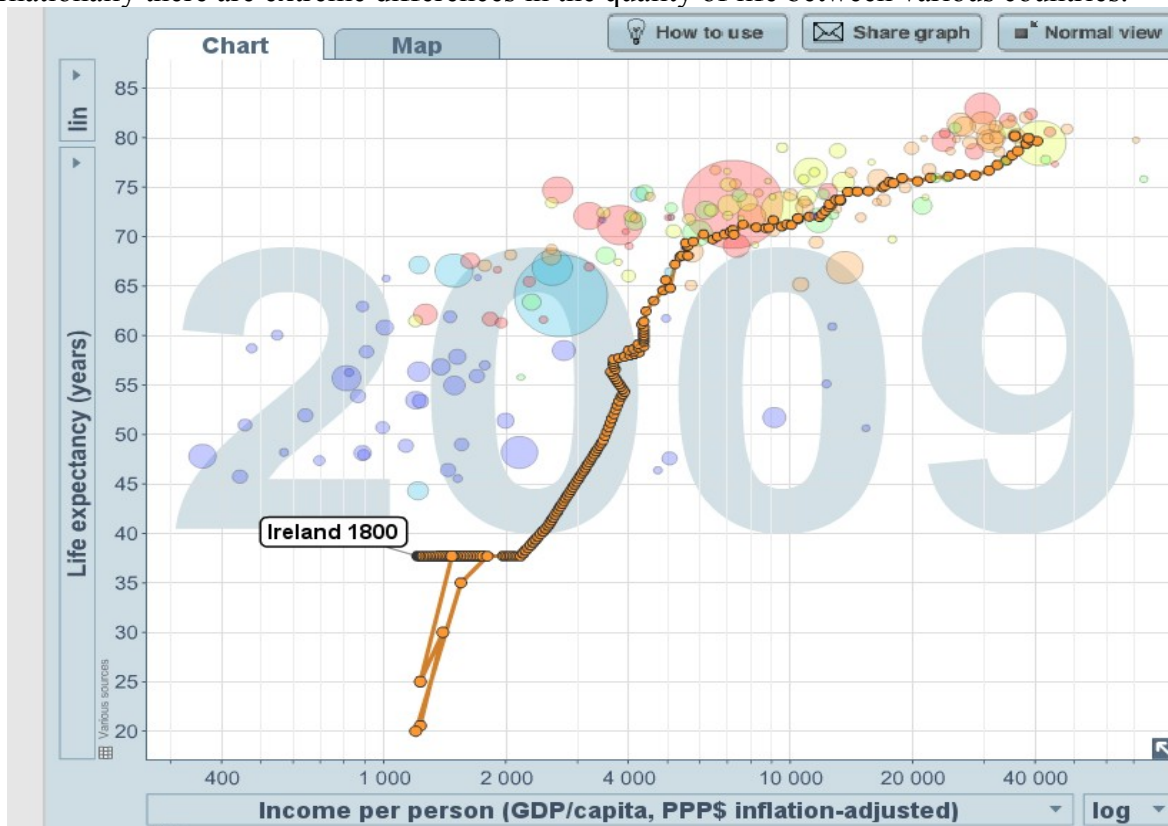
The strains and tensions of asylum seeking life also cause personal, political, racial and religious animosities between groups. People are anxious not to be identified as asylum seekers and may be very reluctant to leave the site for any reason.

A direct provision site overloads already-stretched health and community services. Volunteer groups frequently find themselves having to supply state services such as translation and information provision.

Many state programs are aimed at people who wish to reenter the workforce and as a result Asylum-seekers are specifically excluded from them. Support groups have serious funding difficulties because funding for Asylum-seeker programs falls between Government departments.

International Economics and Health Comparison

Internationally there are extreme differences in the quality of life between various countries.



Source: Central Statistics Office
 Display Gapminder.orgⁱⁱⁱ

The graph shows life expectancy at birth plotted against income per person in inflation-adjusted international dollars for the years from 1800 to 2009. Note that the income scale is logarithmic.

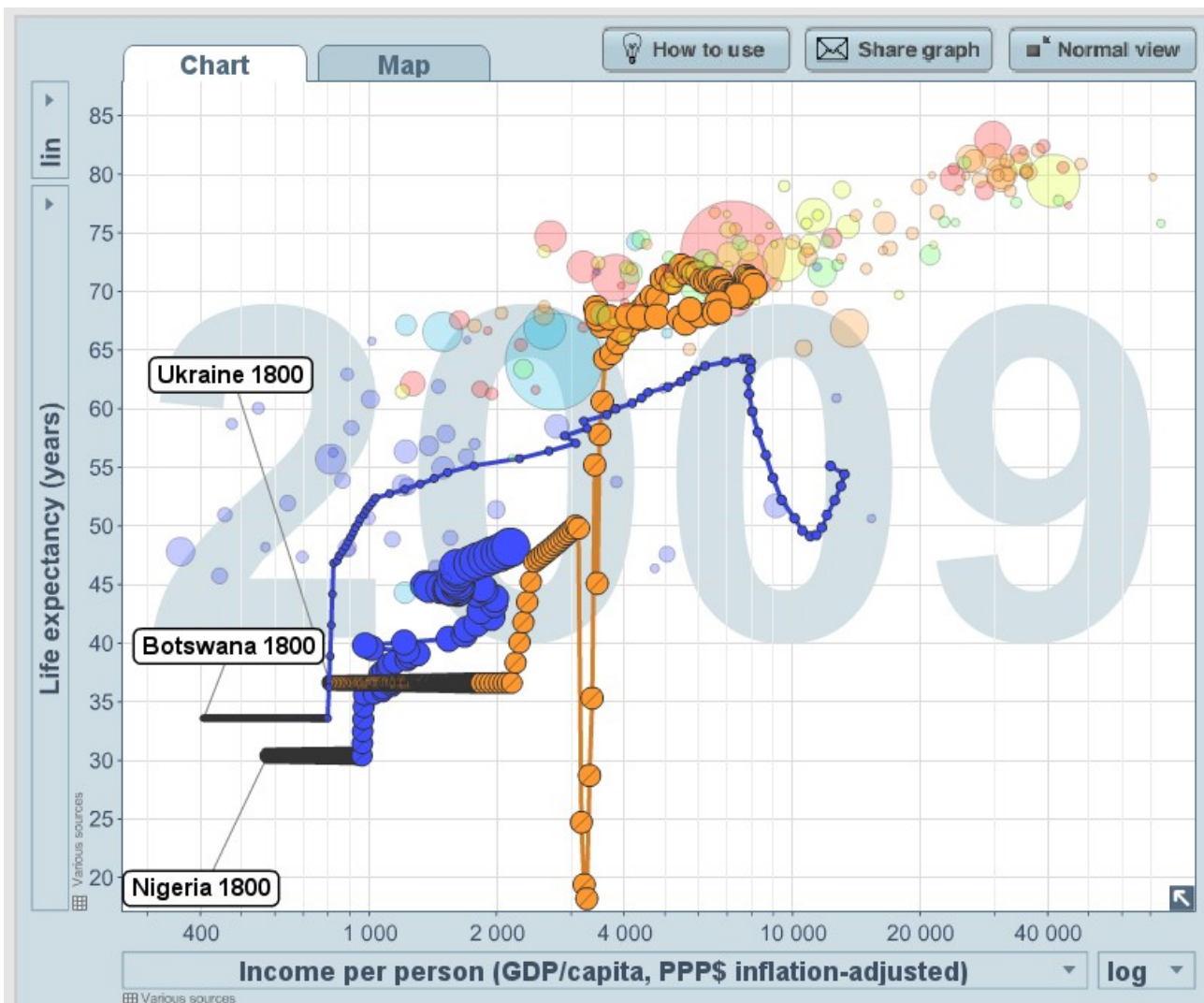
Ireland's progress has been spectacular both in income per capita and quality of life indicators. Per capita income has peaked in 2008 at \$35693 per person per annum with a life expectancy of 80.

The chart shows life expectancy at birth but other social indicators such as maternal and child mortality show the same pattern.

Indicator	1950	2008
Child mortality (0-5 year-olds dying per 1000 born)	53	4
Children per woman (total fertility)	3.3	1.96
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100000 live births)	164	5.7

Source: Central Statistics Office Period Life Expectancy at Various Ages (Years) by Sex, Year and Age^{iv}

Some other countries show a very different picture



Gapminder.org^v

The Ukraine shows a very rapid recovery after the catastrophe of World War 2, peaking in 1990 at a life expectancy of 70 years and a per capita income of \$8123 per annum. Then, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it falls to an income of \$3400 and a life expectancy of 69 in 1999. This is followed by a slow recovery to \$5731 with no increase in life expectancy.

In spite of vast resources Nigeria has essentially stagnated at an average income of \$2000 and a life expectancy of 50.

Botswana is heartbreaking. By 1991 it was close to achieving European standards of income and life expectancy, \$7965 and 64 years. Then the AIDS catastrophe dropped life expectancy to 49 by 2002.

As an example, jobseekers allowance for people aged over 25 in Ireland amounts to €9776 per annum (Citizens Information website 2011) .^{vi} According to the the global richlist ^{vii}website the person receiving this benefit has an income that is in the top 12.82% of the world's population.

While these sort of discrepancies occur migration is inevitable. In a great many countries a responsible parent may decide that is better to take the chance of unofficially emigrating to Europe rather than watch their children die of malnutrition or easily prevented disease.

The main problem is the lack of a clear and transparent immigration system in the entire EU. All EU systems are highly bureaucratic, there are long delays and there is no guarantee of being granted a entry visa or work permit.

As a result of the difficulty of gaining access to the EU legitimately a variety of alternative routes in have come into existence. These include the highly dangerous and expensive sea routes into Italy or Spain and the perceived abuse of the asylum process in most European Union countries.

If there was an efficient and transparent immigration system then many of the unofficial alternatives to the system would fall into disuse.

As a result of these pressures some people attempt to use the asylum seeker route as an alternative immigration route to Europe.

Governments attempt to discourage this irregular migration by a series of actions.

Typical measures include:

- Physical barriers, 'Iron curtain' border control and policing. (Spain^{viii} and Greece^{ix})
- Carrier liability, fining and making carriers return undocumented people to their original port (all EU countries)
- Long, obscure and difficult processing of refugee recognition applications (all EU countries)
- Extreme poverty of applicants during assesment period. (all EU countries)
- Imprisonment of asylum seekers during assesment (Germany)
- Arbitrary expulsions without due process (Greece^x)

These actions are of limited value in limiting irregular migration and actively militate against refugees, that is people seeking protection from persecution.

All these countries having signed up to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.^{xi}

Article 13 of the declaration reads:

- *(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.*
- *(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.*

Article 14 of the declaration reads:

- *(1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.*

The Refugee situation



Child soldier Sri Lanka^{xii}

The main international body involved in refugee handling is the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).^{xiii} The governing documents are:

- Convention on Human Rights
- Convention on Protection of Refugees

Other relevant conventions exist on racism, human rights, status of women and rights of the child.

The UNHCR people of concern are:

- Internally Displaced People (IDP), homeless but who are still in their country of origin
- Refugees, homeless but not in their country of origin
- Returned refugees, people returning to their country of origin

The UNHCR defines a refugee as:

- People who are outside their country of origin
- Unable to return due to a well founded fear of persecution

Persecution may be on religious, social or ethnic grounds. It may be carried out by a government or government agency. If a person is being persecuted by a non-government agency refugee status may be obtained if it can be shown that a government agency fails to protect them.

The definition of a refugee shows its origins in the early 1950's. It's much easier to succeed with a claim if you have been persecuted by a government agency such as the KGB or Gestapo. In recent years repressive governments have tended to subcontract their dirty work to 'unofficial' militias such as Arkan's Tigers in former Yugoslavia or the Janjaweed militia in the Sudan.

It's difficult to make a successful claim on non-political grounds.

Many people who need protection fail to get it because of the highly political definition of refugee status. The 1951 convention does not offer protection to many people who need it. It does not protect victims of the 2004 tsunami or other natural disasters, homosexuals who are in danger of their lives, or women who are fleeing female genital mutilation or forced marriage.

Numbers

By end 2009, the total population of concern to UNHCR was estimated at 36.5 million people, broken down as follows:

- 10.4 million refugees;
- 2 984,000 asylum-seekers;
- 251,000 refugees who had repatriated during 2009;
- 15.6 million IDPs protected/ assisted by UNHCR;
- 2.2 million IDPs who had returned to their place of origin in 2009;
- 6.6 million stateless persons;
- 412,000 others of concern.

Developing countries hosted 8.3 million refugees, or 80 per cent of the global refugee population. Asia hosted over half of the global refugee population (54%), followed by Africa (22%), Europe (16%), North America (4%), Latin America and the Caribbean (4%), and Oceania (0.3%).

According to UNHCR's global estimates, there were 2.9 million Afghan refugees, including one million in a refugee-like situation, accounting for one quarter of the global refugee population under UNHCR's responsibility.

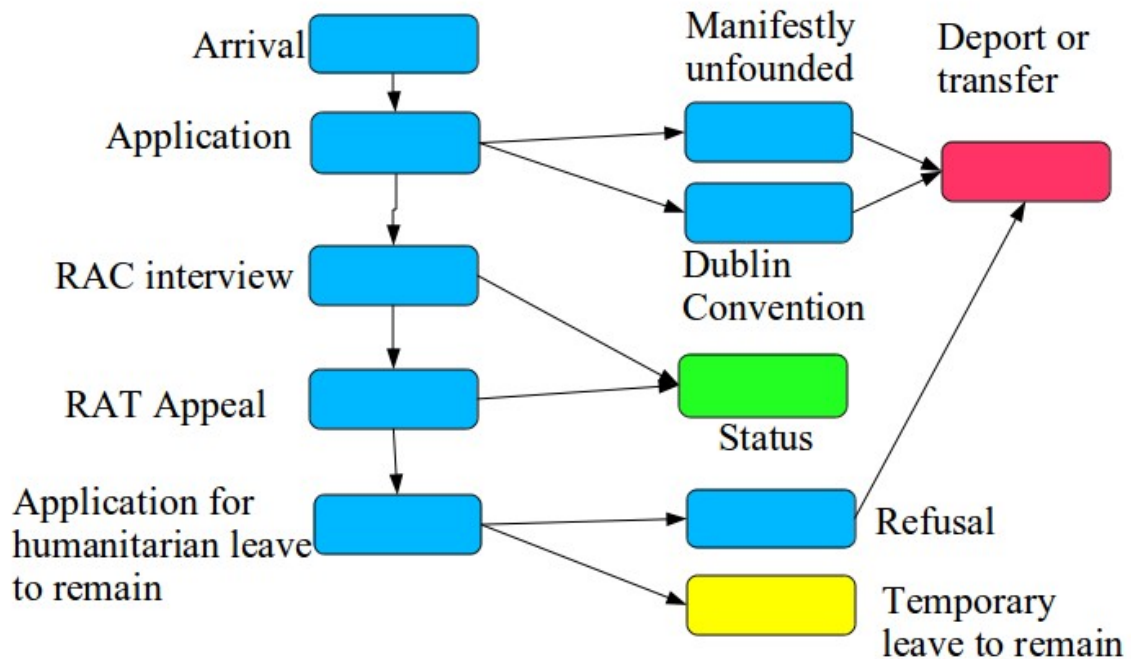
Iraq was the second largest country of origin of refugees (1.8 million), followed by Somalia (678,000), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (456,000), and Myanmar (407,000).

All data from UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2009 ^{xiv}

Asylum Seeking in Ireland

The UN convention on the protection of refugees is incorporated into the 1996 Refugee Act.^{xv} This sets up structures and processes for determining the validity of a refugee application.

The Asylum Process



Note: 'Dublin Convention' refers to the agreement between EU states on who should process individual asylum applications.

The main government agencies involved are:

- The Refugee Applications Commissioner (RAC) who makes the initial decision on an application
- The Refugee Appeals Tribunal (RAT) who handle appeals from a negative decision by the RAC
- The Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) who manage the direct provision sites
- The Garda National Immigration Bureau who handle border control and immigration law enforcement, including deportation.

The Irish figures for 2009 are:

Refugees	9571
Asylum seekers	1755
Returned refugees	0
Internally displaced persons (IDP)	0
Returned IDPs	0
Stateless persons	0
Total population of concern	12326

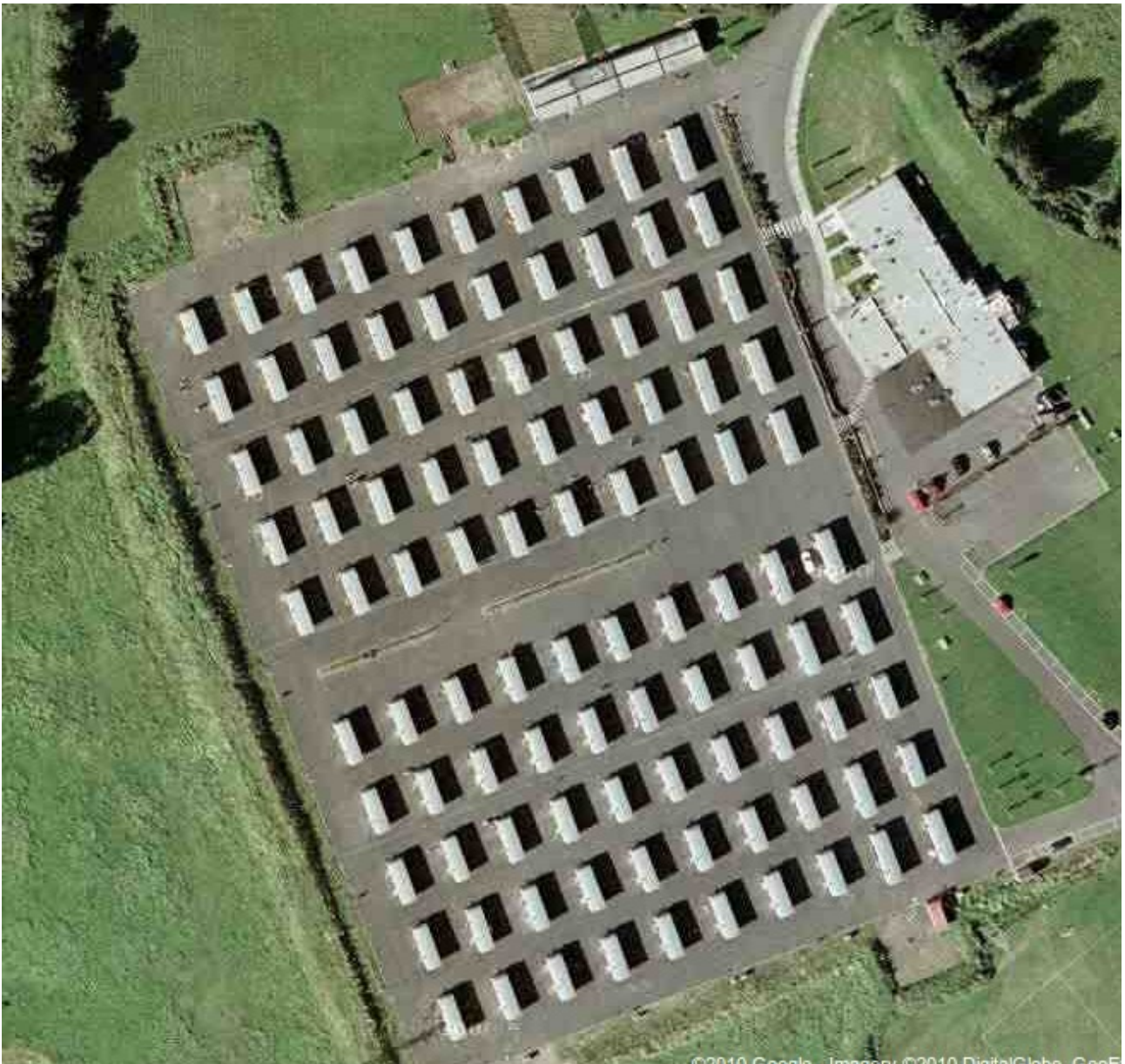
Source: UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2009 ^{xvi}

Costs:

In July 2009 Justice Minister Dermot Ahern confirmed that the State spend on accommodating 6,879 asylum seekers in 60 accommodation centres for the first six months of 2009 was €44.2m.

Mr Ahern also confirmed that the spend by the Government in the area of asylum seeker accommodation amounted to €337.6m between 2005 and 2008. ^{xvii}

The Athlone Site



Google Maps^{xviii}

Site Facilities

The asylum seekers site in Lizzywollen Athlone has been opened since October 1999. It is located in an industrial area on the outskirts of the town. It consists of 100 mobile homes, an administration block and a medical block.

There are 19 6-berth and 81 4-berth mobile homes giving a total possible population of 438 people.

The administration block consists of a canteen, laundry, community welfare office, recreation area and administration offices.

The medical block contains the public health nurse, doctor's office, New Horizon office and a pre-school.

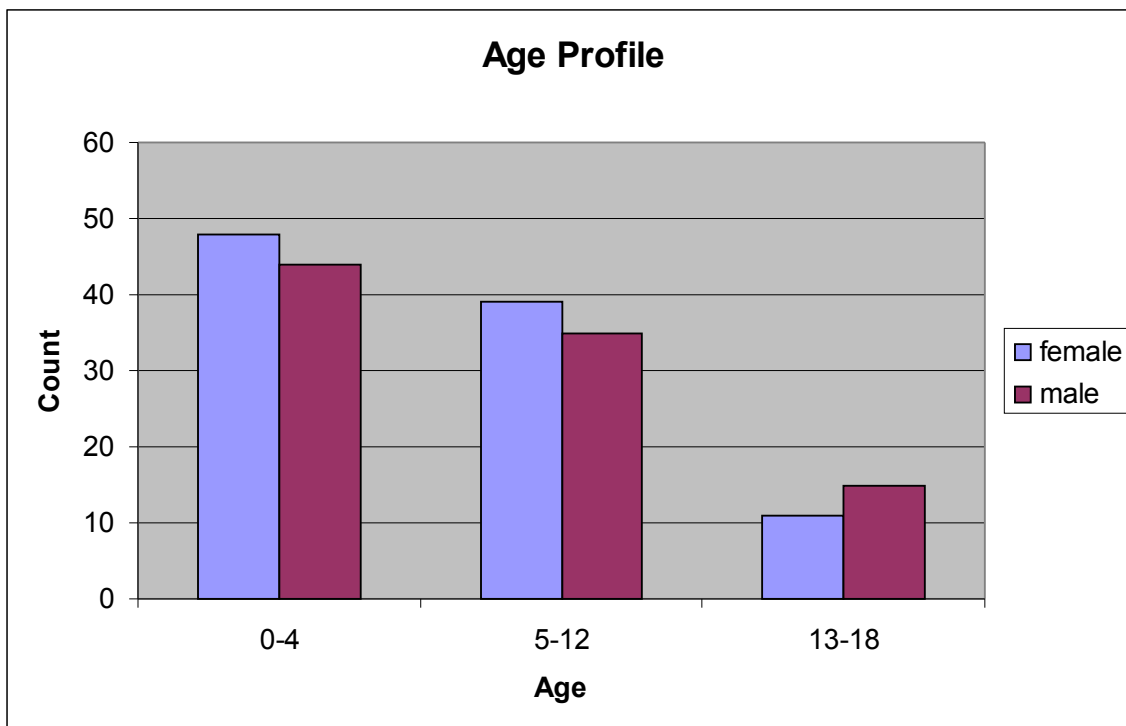
There are a few open areas that are used for sporting activities. The basketball court has been converted to a car park. There was a playground but this was removed after the equipment became damaged and unsafe.

The Athlone site is operated by Bridgestock Ltd. This company operates six direct provision sites in the west of Ireland. In its accounts up to June 2008 it shows that it more than doubled its operating profits to €1.5m. Operating profit to June 2007 was €619,000.^{xix}

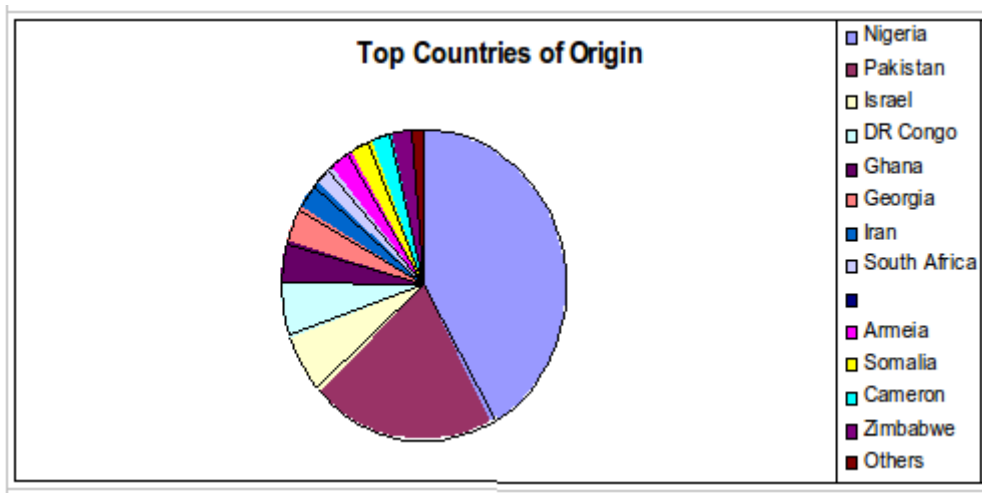
Demographics

On 15th January 2011 there were 323 people in 87 family groups resident. 128 people are 18 and over, there are 195 children between the ages of 0 and 18 years.

Childrens age profile



Countries of origin

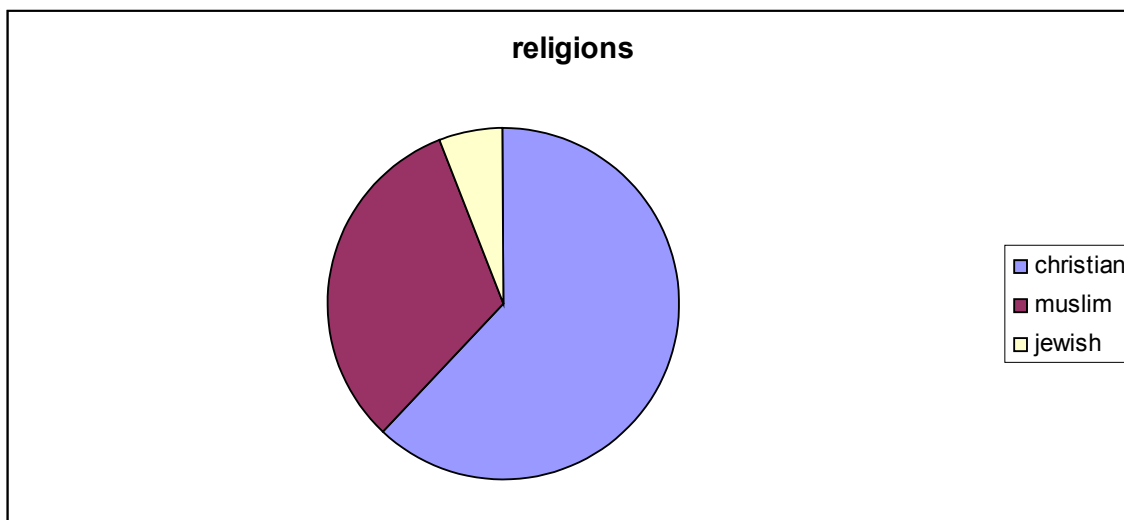


The top two countries of origin are Nigeria and Pakistan.

Country of origin	Number of families
Nigeria	32
Pakistan	17
Israel	5
DR Congo	4
Ghana	3
Georgia	3
Iran	2
South Africa	2
Armenia	2
Somalia	2
Cameroon	2
Zimbabwe	2
Albania	1
Mauritius	1
Angola	1
Kenya	1
Eritrea	1

Country of origin	Number of families
Iraq	1
Botswana	1
Belarus	1
Ivory Coast	1
Sri Lanka	1
Azerbaijan	1

Religions



Religious group	Number of families
Christian	54
Muslim	28
Jewish	5

Languages

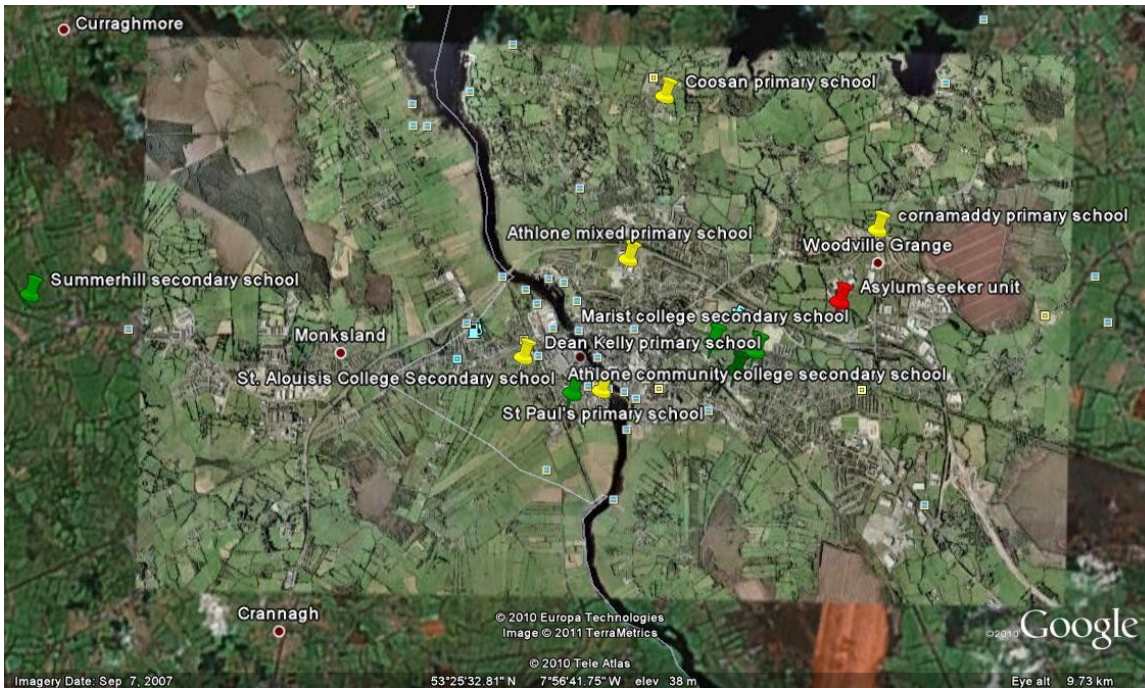
Main language spoken	Number of families
English	37
French	6
Russian	9

Main language spoken	Number of families
Urdu	17
Farsi	2
Arabic	1
Portuguese	1
Amharic	1
Swahilli	2

Length of time in asylum seeking process

Year of application	Number of families
2003	3
2004	3
2005	12
2006	17
2007	18
2008	12
2009	5
2010	8

Education



All asylum seeker and refugee children aged between four and eighteen have a right to primary and post-primary education in a manner similar to the rest of the Irish population .

Because of overcrowding in the schools nearest the site children are bused to schools over the entire Athlone area. The main primary schools attended are:

- Cornamaddy
- Coosan
- Athlone mixed
- Dean Kelly
- St. Pauls

The main secondary schools attended are:

- Our Lady's Bower
- Marist College
- Athlone Community College
- St. Aloysius College
- Summerhill College

Harmony Community Development program run a free pre-school education service on site.

Issues of most concern to the community

Asylum application processing

The main concern of residents is with the asylum application process itself. It is seen as being:

- Slow, confusing and apparently arbitrary decision making process
- Fear of a midnight raid to deport people who's application had been refused. This happens, on average three times per year.
- Not reflecting real world conditions, such as difficulty in making a case on the bases of female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Lack of information on progress of application.
- Inefficiencies in the application process. Out of 100 people granted refugee status, 75 will have been granted at appeal stage and 25 at first instance application. From an a cost-effective point-of-view this should be the other way around.
- Interviews and legal advice are only available in Dublin.
- Language and education barriers in understanding the process.

Accommodation

There are 100 mobile homes on site. A family with 2 children is allocated a 2 bedroom caravan while a single parent with one child is required to share a mobile home with another single parent and child. Concerns expressed are:

- The length of time that people are required to live in the mobile homes is excessive.
- People at the end of the application process live in dread of imminent deportation.
- The mobile homes are now over ten years old and some are in bad condition.
- They can get very hot in summer and very cold in winter.
- The rooms in the mobile homes are too small. A tall person has to sleep with their feet protuding from the bedroom door.
- There is a severe lack of recreation facilities on site
- There is poor maintenance of what facilities exist.

Health

There are a range of concerns about the physical and mental health of asylum seekers living on the site:

- The slow process, extreme boredom and uncertainty leads to mental health issues, child and spouse abuse.
- The deep feeling of being excluded from society leads to a general air of helplessness and depression on the site.
- Things get very difficult emotionally when people are deported. It's almost impossible to

explain to a five-year-old why their closest friend has disappeared. This leads to mental health problems in children.

- It can be difficult to get a translator capable of handling medical issues
- Cultural issues make it difficult for women from some countries to describe their symptoms to a male doctor.
- While asylum seekers have a medical card automatically it can be difficult to find a doctor who can take them on to their register.
- Local doctors can be inexperienced in recognising problems that don't exist in the wider population. Examples are tuberculosis and sickle-cell anemia.
- Overcrowding is blamed for respiratory problems in children.
- The nearest hospital to Athlone is Portunciula in Ballinasloe. This causes severe problems to parents with children in the hospital. Public transport is very limited and taxi fares can cost €30:00 each way.
- Specialist services, such as counselling for the victims of torture, are only available in Dublin and on a very restricted basis.

Food

Food is provided three times each day in a common dining area. It is almost impossible to produce a menu that reflects the tastes of twenty different nationalities. Issues raised are:

- Quality and quantity of food
- Monotony of menu
- Culturally appropriate food being provided, such as halal meat.
- Cooked food being supplied when people would like to get it raw and cook to their own tastes

Unemployment

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work and that causes many problems. Some of these are:

- Many people have worked every day since they were children and forced idleness makes for many physical and mental health problems.
- Unemployment leads to depression and low self esteem. Fathers are no longer the breadwinner and this deprives them of a role in the family.
- To live any sort of a minimally satisfactory life people need money to get their essential needs and an occasional treat.
- In addition to providing badly-needed money work allows a person to make friends and develop links with the local community.

Support for community activity, involvement levels

The volunteer groups:

New Horizon is a voluntary support group for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Athlone.

It was established in 2000 by individuals from the local community. Membership of the group consists of individuals from the community and statutory sectors as well as asylum seekers.

New Horizon's aim is to welcome and befriend new communities coming to live in Athlone and advocate for their inclusion and positive integration into Irish society. New Horizon offer a range of social, befriending, advocacy, sports and information provision services.

Harmony CDP is a Community Development Organisation that operates with an aim "*to promote equality and positive change in Athlone in favor of those who benefit least*". Core funding of Harmony is provided by the Department of Rural Community and Gaelteacht Affairs.

Harmony's main activity on site is the running of the pre-school but for brief periods in 2004 and 2006 it provided an on-site support worker.

Statutory agencies

The following facilities are provided by statutory agencies on the site:

- Community welfare officer provided by the Health Service Executive
- Primary healthcare centre provided by the Health Service Executive
- English language and literacy courses are provided by the Vocational Education Committee.
- Health, child care and cookery courses are provided by the Health Service Executive

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Strengths

The following are seen as the strengths of the asylum seeker community:

- The incredible resilience shown by people in getting here and living in extremely difficult conditions
- The wide diversity of cultures, languages, religions and educational levels makes people very resourceful

Weaknesses

The following are seen as the weaknesses of the asylum seeker community:

- It's not really a community, being split by language, nationality, tribal and religious groupings. About the only thing everyone can agree on is their extreme dislike for the Department of Justice!
- People have great difficulty recognising that they can change anything in their lives.

- People concentrate totally on one issue, getting refugee status. When they find out that volunteer groups can't provide this they tend to lose interest in community development issues.
- Language and literacy issues make communications with the outside community difficult.
- New Horizon has found it difficult to recruit and retain volunteers.
- The national network of volunteer support groups is not longer operational. This makes it difficult to tap into resources and skills in other groups.

Opportunities

It's important to emphasise that longer term opportunities are totally dependent on getting recognition of refugee status. Opportunities while in the asylum process are very limited.

The following are seen as the opportunities of the asylum seeker community:

- English language learning, either formally or informally, can be of benefit either in Ireland or in the home country.
- Similarly computer, parenting, cooking and childcare skills are useful and transferable.
- Asylum seeking children attend normal schools. These schools are of excellent quality compared to the equivalent in the home country. Through these schools and the influence of their classmates they become aware of their own strengths and opportunities.

Threats

Perceived threats are:

- Severe cutbacks in funding for asylum seeker support
- Even slower processing of asylum applications

Recommendations

There are a great deal of improvements that can be made in the asylum system. Based on a 'greatest benefit for the greatest number' principle the following recommendations are made:

- Improve the speed and efficiency of the process
- Provide uncooked food and cooking facilities to residents
- End the 4am deportation raids by the Garda National Immigration Bureau
- Increase the asylum seeker allowance to a liveable level
- Improve access to health services, particularly to local doctors and hospitals
- Allow asylum-seekers to work if a decision has not being made on their case in six months.
- Conduct an updated needs analysis on site. The last one was done by Harmony in 2005.

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