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Social housing, community development and the integration of immigrant communities: emerging challenges

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This article discusses issues of social integration and community development arising from the growth of immigrant communities in Irish cities in recent years. The article draws in particular on experience in Limerick, the country's third-largest urban centre, and the retail and business capital of the Mid-West Region.

Limerick has been described as a socio-economically polarised city, characterised by high levels of residential segregation along social class lines that have been a feature of the city's geography for some time (McCafferty, 2011a). The city's residential communities have boundaries that correspond variously with Roman Catholic parishes, social housing estates, RAPID areas¹ and, latterly, regeneration areas,² and these boundaries define neighbourhoods that can be classified into a number of distinctive social area types. Residential mobility across the boundaries between different types of social area has been restricted by aspects of the city's housing system, both public and private, though there is some evidence of increased mobility in recent years (McCafferty and O'Keeffe, 2009).

The surge in immigration in the last decade has resulted in the long-established social geography of the city being overlaid by a new pattern of cultural and ethnic differentiation, and a segregation of new immigrant groups which is even more pronounced than social class-based segregation (McCafferty, 2011b). The key elements of ethnic segregation are a concentration of immigrants in private residential accommodation in the city centre, and an under-representation of these groups in social housing. According to the most recently published (2006) census, over 10,000 persons, or 11 per cent of the population of the urban area, are non-Irish nationals, and 3,855 persons (4 per cent of the population) report their ethnic background as other than white.³ The city centre contains less than 5 per cent of the Irish nationals resident in the urban area, but 30 per cent of the Polish nationals.⁴ It contains 4 per cent of the white Irish population, but 26 per cent of the black population. Conversely, the areas containing the main local authority housing estates (including all the regeneration estates) contain almost 15 per cent of both Irish nationals and white Irish in the urban area, but just 5 per cent of Polish nationals and less than 1 per cent of the black population.⁵

This evidence of residential segregation, based on small area data from the 2006 census, has presented a number of challenges to Doras Luimní, a migrant support organisation in Limerick City which has been promoting and supporting the rights of migrants for 11 years. It is the experience of Doras Luimní that, after a decade of large-scale inward migration there is a dearth of migrant families settling in established social housing areas. The increased cultural and ethnic diversity of the population in the city as a whole is not found in social housing areas, which remain relatively homogenous. Although there is a significant number of non-Irish nationals on the City's housing list and in receipt of rent allowance supports, there are limited inlets for these groups into areas that are traditionally inhabited

by the native Limerick population, and that tend to grow from the inside. The result is that there has been a gradual ghettoization of immigrant communities in the city. This exclusion of immigrant groups from social housing areas is potentially problematical, because it is within these areas that there is an established community infrastructure such as community centres, community crèches, sports facilities and teams, and other community-based social outlets. These facilities are resourced by national and local government and consequently are either affordable or free of charge. They are, therefore, a vital support for families and individuals on lower incomes, as well as being the focal point around which community grows, and a mechanism to enhance integration.

The emerging tendencies towards the ghettoization of immigrant groups have been driven by a range of factors and processes. The concentration of immigrant groups in the city centre is a common feature of the social geographies of cities that have experienced significant immigration. To a considerable degree it may be voluntary on the part of the immigrants, and driven by benefits that arise from location close to co-nationals who share a language, religion, or other social and cultural traits. However, in Limerick, concentration in the city centre, and exclusion from social housing areas, have also been the unintended results of housing policies, in particular as these relate to persons from outside the European Economic Area (EEA).

It is difficult for many newcomers to gain access to social housing. To be considered for social housing by a local authority a person has to show 'Proof of [...] leave to remain in Ireland; where applicable, evidence of having a Stamp 4 Immigration Stamp Endorsement on a passport for a period of 5 years should be provided' (Limerick City Council, 2011a). It is the experience of Doras Luimní that the longest period of time that non-exceptional cases of Stamp 4

holders receive from the Department of Justice and Equality is 3 years, with an option to renew. Therefore the required stamp is not a possibility, and hence the individual or family is effectively excluded from social housing, even when there are units available. Similarly, based on the clients that Doras Luimní deals with, there are very few cases of non-EEA immigrants who have 'permission to remain in the State permanently' yet this is a condition of eligibility for the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS), which is a social housing support introduced to cater for the accommodation needs of persons who are in receipt of long-term rent supplement (Limerick City Council, 2011b). Consequently, many migrant families are excluded from this scheme. In restricting the access of immigrant groups to social housing and related supports, these regulations are counterproductive and go against sections 36-42 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 which requires city and county councils to make provision for the prevention and reduction of homelessness. If people cannot get on the housing list, and are excluded from rental support, homelessness becomes a significant risk in the event that they encounter difficulties meeting housing payments.

As well as increased vulnerability to homelessness, many migrant groups in Limerick experience a diminished quality of life as an indirect result of the operation of housing policies. In particular, the effective exclusion of migrants from social housing means that they cannot access any of the associated benefits, such as the employment and training opportunities of RAPID,⁶ the quality-designed modern homes, improved community facilities and integrated services offered by the Regeneration Agency,⁷ or the long established community and family resource centres in social housing estates. If a person is not eligible for social housing they are also not eligible for rent supplement, even if they have a limited income. This pushes low-income migrants out of the more traditional

home model in Ireland, the house, into lower rental-cost apartment living. Many of the migrant individuals and families that Doras Luimní works with settle in city centre apartment blocks. Finnerty (2003, 2010) and O'Connell (2007, 2009) have identified the growth of private rental sector ghettos in Ireland as an issue that needs to be addressed by policy makers. They have also raised concerns about the challenges of managing the significantly increased number of apartment schemes. For migrants settling in these areas the difficulties faced are arguably much greater than for indigenous groups.

Many, perhaps most, of the city centre apartment schemes that contain large immigrant populations suffer from a community vacuum, both in terms of the absence of facilities and infrastructure, and in terms of the nature and type of social networks and inter-personal relationships. Such accommodation is transitory in nature with short-term lease options available. There is no community core, and limited scope for interaction between residents. There has been an acceptance across State agencies that there is a need for a co-ordinated, interagency approach, with strong community involvement to ensure positive living environments (O'Connell, 2007: 84). Yet this is absent in privately run apartment settings. Due to the anonymity of living in these schemes there is little focus around which residents can create a connection, so that individuals have to seek out others that they can link with through common culture, language or belief systems. This may cause people to search for 'community' outside their immediate neighbourhood, so that they have little or no connection to the people or space immediately around them. Alternatively, it encourages groups based on nationality, ethnicity or faith to take up residence in certain areas, so that localities, and in some instances specific buildings, become associated with a narrow set of values. These areas mirror, but are very distinct from, the social housing areas already established in the city.

The danger is that these processes of population sorting according to ethnicity lead to the development of what we might term ‘cultural bubbles’ where the experience of the country of origin has been transposed to a Limerick space, where the medium of communication is the language of the country of origin, the shared experiences echo those of the country of origin, and there is little interaction with the host communities. Individuals are living in a city without knowledge of the language, or an understanding of how the host society, including its systems of public service provision, works. In the immediate term this impacts negatively on immigrants’ ability to access essential services in areas such as health, employment, and education. It also adversely affects the capacity of the host community and the new communities to integrate and evolve together organically. Doras Luimní believes this is leading to the development of parallel societies within the one space, and is creating the potential for conflict when multiple groups compete for limited resources.

There is evidence of efforts to prevent cultural and ethnic polarisation. Local authorities and Community Welfare Offices exercise a degree of flexibility and discretion when applying the housing eligibility regulations in relation to length of residence. Consequently, many more individuals and families have access to the social housing list and rent support than would otherwise be the case. For example, there are currently between 50 and 60 immigrants availing of the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) in Limerick City. However, outside informal practices such as this, the burden of addressing integration issues in a structured manner falls at times to community NGOs.

Doras Luimní attempts to address these issues through partnership, coalition and collaboration. The organisation co-chairs the Limerick City and County Integration Working Group (IWG), which operates under the Social

Inclusion Measures Committees of both Limerick City and County, and was established with the aim of bringing together statutory, community and voluntary bodies to address the integration needs of migrant and host communities in Limerick. These efforts require a lot of buy-in from the varied interest groups, but indications are that both the statutory and non-statutory agencies involved are committed to addressing the more immediate concerns. The Working Group's Integrating Limerick plan was produced following widespread and in-depth consultation with community groups and service providers to identify gaps and barriers as they were perceived at the time (Limerick Integration Working Group, 2010). Significantly though, housing, and more specifically the issue of integrated housing, is not identified as a theme. Despite this, it is the view of Doras Luimní that the issue of where migrants are housed is a key factor underpinning other issues addressed in the plan, such as access to information and to education.

At community level, Doras Luimní has two specific actions aimed at breaking down the barriers that may impede community interaction. Firstly, support is provided to mainstream service providers and migrant groups to build their capacity to develop, communicate, and respond to each other's needs. Doras Luimní's activity in this area includes, for example, its work as chair of the IWG to build relationships with and between communities, whilst contributing to the development of policy and practice relevant to community work and to the issues faced by communities. This work is based on the values and principles of community work set out by the Community Workers' Cooperative (Community Workers' Cooperative, 2008), including empowerment, participation, inclusion and collective action. Secondly, events are organised to celebrate the cultural and ethnic diversity of Limerick, and to promote inter-culturalism in the cultural and social scene

of Limerick. The purpose of these events is to create a friendly atmosphere where all communities can positively interact, and learn from, and contribute to, the experience of living in a diverse Limerick (Doras Luimní, 2011).

While these efforts have met with some success, a significant drawback is that, in the main, the many elements of Limerick's culturally diverse population rarely share the same space. The result is that, when they do interact, it tends to be either in a process of exoticisation of each other, or, more problematically, when conflicts arise during routine daily activities. Access to services (both public services such as post offices and social welfare offices, and private services such as shops and restaurants) is often the flashpoint for inter-racial conflict, and there is already evidence that racism is a problem in day-to-day interactions between some migrants and some members of the host community.⁸

In addition to these community-level actions, Doras Luimní also campaigns for structural change that will break down the barriers to integration, such as by abolishing, or at least amending, those clauses within public policy that automatically exclude. As well as the examples from the housing policy domain dealt with in this article, there are many other instances of exclusionary policies. One of the most significant in terms of segregating newcomers is the policy of direct provision of asylum seekers' basic needs for food and shelter while their claims for refugee status are being processed (Reception and Integration Agency, 2011). The effect of the direct provision policy is to house asylum seekers away from the general population, thereby restricting their integration. Another group that is explicitly excluded is those who are considered not habitually resident. These individuals are precluded from accessing State services and supports because they do not satisfy five distinct eligibility criteria (Department of

Social Protection, 2011).⁹ Doras Luimní, in consultation with migrant groups, communities and individuals, and in collaboration with other NGOs, is actively calling for change in the conditions for habitual residence.

Using the tool of campaigning within the work of Doras Luimní has a multifaceted benefit. A key impact area is public awareness, because by promoting understanding and empathy on the part of the established and empowered populations, grassroots agitation against the status quo is more likely to occur. Lobbying at local and national, even occasionally international, levels to create an understanding of the diverse migrant populations' perspectives informs those in a position of power of the need to change legislation and policy. It is only through such changes that service providers can implement more equitable systems. As an organisation advocating change, in partnership and coalition with other NGOs, Doras Luimní is uniquely placed. The majority of migrant-specific organisations are based in Dublin, and most focus on a subset of the migrant sector. Doras Luimní, on the other hand, offers support to all migrants, as well as the indigenous population. Its presence in Limerick, outside the services hub of Dublin, means that many of the issues that are encountered are distinct from the experience of Dublin-based migrants. This work brings a Mid-Western perspective to what can often be predominantly an Eastern Region discourse, and thereby enhances the body of knowledge on which agitation for change is based.

It is crucially important for Doras Luimní that migrants and their issues are positioned in public discourse not merely as 'others'. The people Doras Luimní works with through its drop-in centre are parents, students, families, individuals with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, older, young, educated, and illiterate. They are people with aspirations, dreams, hopes, experiences, anxieties, loves, fears. They

happen to have migrated from somewhere to Ireland, and find themselves, either by accident, design or policy, living in the Mid-West of the country. Many of their issues and concerns are shared by the indigenous population, as well as by the varied other groups supported by the community and voluntary sector. There are, at times, extra burdens or extra barriers that impact directly on migrants, but there are also many instances where the migrant and indigenous populations are in solidarity with each other through common grievance or celebration. To talk about migrants as being a homogeneous group belies the experience of a broad range of diverse people. There are often hidden structural inequalities that can impact on multiple layers of exclusion for the generic 'migrant'. A black person who also happens to be a woman with a disability may have completely different experiences from an able-bodied white man with English language difficulties. One or the other's marital status, family status or immigration stamp may influence the level of access they have to mainstream society and community structures.

While it is not valid, therefore, to generalise about 'migrants', or to think in terms of a dichotomy between migrant and Irish, nevertheless some conclusions can be drawn about the needs of the more vulnerable and marginalised migrants, as represented by those who access the services of Doras Luimní. The competition for limited resources mentioned earlier has significant repercussions for community work, as practitioners attempt to foster a sense of solidarity between what can be perceived, at times, as opposing elements and hierarchies of deserving, that is, migrant communities versus more established geographic communities of disadvantage. Any ghettoization that develops as a result of town planning or housing policies and practices renders more difficult attempts to create vibrant, integrated and inclusive communities. It is important, therefore, that in framing such

policies a holistic approach to housing provision, which recognises the importance of the community dimension, be explicitly adopted. In addition, there is a need to support migrants to participate in decisions that affect their lives, including those in areas such as social housing policy. Some efforts have already begun in this regard, with the Limerick City Community Forum, which includes members from all communities, encouraging members to sit on the City Council's Strategic Policy Committees. This is an example of good practice in creating the conditions for migrants to participate actively and critically in local communities and decision making.

In conclusion, the surge in immigration in the first decade of this century, and the resulting increase in the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Irish population, together present significant challenges for housing policy and for community development. There is evidence that, in Limerick, many of the new migrants live separate from the host community, and while residential segregation may be voluntary in some instances, it is the experience of Doras Luimní that to some degree, and for some categories of migrant, it stems from housing and other public policies. The results of segregation for migrants are isolation, exclusion and a lack of connectedness to the mainstream society. For society at large, forcing migrants to remain outside of the mainstream, and to be established as the 'other' in public discourses undermines the positive contribution they, along with all others, can make to the development of Irish society and to the communities of which they should be an integral part. Responding to these issues calls for ground-level community development work with both indigenous and immigrant communities, and incorporation of the voice of immigrants and the expertise of their representative bodies, such as Doras Luimní, in public policy formation and implementation.

1. RAPID is the Irish Government's programme for Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development. One of RAPID's key objectives is to improve the integration and coordination of public services for people experiencing different forms of economic and social disadvantage.
2. The Limerick Regeneration Agencies were established by the Irish Government in June 2007 in response to the Fitzgerald report to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion on issues prevailing in Moyross and other disadvantaged areas of Limerick City.
3. The urban area is defined as the legally defined City and surrounding suburban Electoral Districts (EDs).
4. The city centre is defined as the ED's of Custom House, Shannon A and B, and Dock A, B, C, and D.
5. The areas referred to are the ED's of Ballynanty, Custom House, Galvone B, John's A and B, Killeely A and B, Prospect B and Rathbane, in all of which the percentage of households renting their accommodation from the local authority is at least 25 per cent.
6. These include opportunities provided by RAPID's Employment and Training theme, which is intended to help local agencies to work together in a cohesive manner to address the needs of disadvantaged urban communities.
7. See the Regeneration Agency's web site: <http://www.limerickregeneration.ie/>
8. See for example Doras Luimni's submission to the NGO Alliance Against Racism (NAAR) Shadow Report to the United Nations Committee on the Eradication of Racial Discrimination.
9. The Habitual Residence Condition was introduced on 1 May 2004 as a qualifying requirement for social assistance payments and Child Benefit. It is presumed, until the contrary is shown, that an applicant is not habitually resident if they have been living in the State or the common travel area for less than two years. According to the Department of Social Protection, the onus is always on the applicant to provide sufficient evidence that they are habitually resident in the State. In determining whether a person is habitually resident, five factors set down by the European Court of Justice are to be considered: length and continuity of residence in Ireland; length and purpose of absence from Ireland; nature and pattern of the employment; applicant's main centre of interest; and future intentions of the applicant.

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