

A FRIENDLY FACE IN A NEW PLACE

The influx of asylum seekers to Ireland since 1997 has been a new phenomenon for a country which has historically been a country of emigration. The arrival of foreigners was something new and unexpected for local communities, and there were few support services in place to deal with the needs of asylum seekers. In 2000, the Irish government introduced a policy of dispersal, under which asylum seekers are sent to live in accommodation centres in different parts of the country. Existing services were stretched to the limit when the number of asylum applications started to rise and peaked in 2002.

When asylum seekers arrive in a new country, they are faced not only with an unfamiliar environment and an uncertain future, but also a lack of information about the asylum application process, their rights and the services available to them. They may not know where to go for information on legal assistance and health services, for example. Likewise, the host community is often unaware of asylum seekers' predicament and the real reasons behind their arrival in Ireland.

The SONAS (Support Organisation for the Needs of Asylum Seekers) project was the first partnership to be set up under the EQUAL Asylum Seekers programme in Ireland. It was made up of several different partners working to help asylum seekers, including non-profit organisations such as SPIRASI, Partas and the Vincentian Refugee Centre in Dublin, the National Training and Employment Authority (FAS), as well as partnerships in the cities of Cork, Wexford and Limerick.

The project partners quickly discovered that the information provided to asylum seekers on their arrival in Ireland by government services in the form of an information pack was insufficient. Many asylum seekers may not read or speak English. Also, many come from cultures where information is passed on verbally. "*Providing an information pack is not enough,*" explained John Kearns of Partas, one of the project partners: "*Asylum seekers need the friendly face of someone who can listen and understand.*"

SONAS partners came up with an innovative way to address this information gap. They hired and trained four outreach workers to be based in four geographical areas: Dublin, Cork, Wexford and Limerick, who could provide direct support to asylum seekers and act as 'links' to support services and public authorities. During the two years the project ran, SONAS outreach workers assisted 1,194 asylum seekers¹ by providing them with information on the asylum procedure and important legislative changes, their rights and entitlements, welfare provisions, as well as other useful information, such as opportunities for voluntary work. Two of the outreach workers were former asylum seekers themselves, and could therefore understand what the people they came in contact with on a daily basis were going through. Sorina Selaru, a former asylum seeker from Romania explained what her job was about: "*The idea was not to give advice but offer information to asylum seekers so that they could make important choices for themselves.*"

REACHING OUT TO THOSE IN NEED

The SONAS project aimed not only to provide information and support to asylum seekers following their arrival in Ireland and help them come in contact with the local community and government services, but also to address their psycho-social and cultural needs. The project started its work by designing and implementing a training programme to prepare staff to provide an outreach service to asylum seekers. Four outreach workers underwent four specialised training sessions over two years. The outreach workers then made themselves available to

¹ The partnership assisted a total of 1772 persons.

asylum seekers by visiting reception and accommodation centres, and other organisations such as health centres, and explaining what they could offer. The approach taken was to let the outreach workers use their own initiative in carrying out their job and in this way empower them. Posters were put up and flyers and leaflets were distributed at centres and other places frequented by asylum seekers. The outreach workers also made presentations to groups to make themselves known in the community and initiated meetings with public services to develop contacts and maintain effective working relationships with these. This proved useful as outreach workers often referred asylum seekers to relevant services and vice versa.



In addition to providing information to asylum seekers on the asylum process and services available to them, they were also informed about support networks in their area. Where such networks didn't exist, outreach workers took the initiative in setting them up. This was the case in Cork, where the Cork Networking Committee was created. The outreach worker based in Limerick was also instrumental in setting up the Limerick Integration Action Committee. A number of self-help and cultural groups were also initiated for asylum seeker communities in these areas.

Another important aspect of outreach workers' work was to explain public attitudes to asylum seekers and vice versa, acting as a cultural bridge between them and the service providers they came in contact with. In this way, they were able to tackle misconceptions and raise awareness in the host community. For Egide Dhala, a SONAS outreach worker in Dublin, this was a crucial part of his job: *"This role of cultural mediation was important because some asylum seekers had difficulty accessing services because they were not familiar with the new society and how things work here. I spent a lot of time explaining the procedures that need to be followed and why things work the way they do."*

The four outreach workers faced numerous obstacles and challenges during the course of their job. At the start of the outreach service, for example, they were not allowed to access accommodation centres, but this was quickly resolved once the aims of the SONAS project were explained to the responsible authorities. In order to reach asylum seekers who tend to be more isolated than most, for example, mothers at home with small children, the outreach workers went out of their way to get in contact with them by visiting their homes. Other obstacles faced were due to the restrictive laws and regulations in place, restricting asylum seekers' access to work and training, for example. At times, outreach workers had feelings of 'uselessness' and frustration when they could not help their clients because of these limitations. In order to discuss the challenges they faced on a daily basis, exchange information and experiences, and explore solutions to problems and offer each other peer support, the four outreach workers met once a month along with the national coordinator.

Roland (not his real name), as asylum seeker from Cameroon, described how the SONAS project was able to help him: *"I'll never forget the day the SONAS outreach worker came to see me and my wife at home, because it was a turning point for us. He told me how I could volunteer my services as a professional interpreter. This helped me gain valuable work experience in my own field and gave me a way to fill my days. It was a way of getting my life back."*

MAKING AN IMPACT

One of the SONAS project's objectives was to influence policy relating to asylum seekers at national and European level. In order to tackle this difficult task, a policy review sub-committee was set up to review the policy agenda, and explore how it could be informed by the feedback that the outreach workers received from their daily contact with asylum seekers. The feedback received was used to prepare a report addressing asylum seekers' experiences and concerns regarding the management of accommodation centres, information and support services and isolation. This led to the drafting of a policy proposal suggesting improvements in planning, coordination and the delivery of services to asylum seekers.

The valuable assistance that the SONAS outreach service has been able to provide to asylum seekers has convinced all partners that it is a useful and necessary service which could be successfully adopted by mainstream service providers. With this objective, the project was in contact with several government agencies, including the Reception and Integration Agency, Comhairle (the national support agency for information, advice and advocacy on social services) and local health boards. It held several meetings with Comhairle and the Cork Citizens' Information Service about the possibilities of mainstreaming its activities in Cork. As a result, one of the project partners, the Cork City Partnership, secured multi-agency funding from the Health Service Executive – Southern Area, Cork City Council and the Sisters of Mercy – Southern Province, to continue the service in Cork. This service continues and still impacts on policy development at local level. Another project partner, SRIRASI, is also continuing aspects of the SONAS project via the health board. Also, in Wexford, support is continuing in the form of a self-help group. Though the SONAS project came to an end in November 2005, aspects inspired by it are continuing under different shapes and forms, which is proof of its added-value.

Another notable success is the accreditation of the training programme the project developed for its outreach workers. Following discussions with Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, the training programme became an accredited certificate course for people working with asylum seekers in May 2005. The SONAS partnership has also published a Training Guide for Working with Asylum Seekers, which outlines a training model that staff and volunteers of organisations who work with asylum seekers are recommended to participate in based on the partnership's experience.

John Kearns described the challenge of mainstreaming: *"The mainstreaming objective was the most difficult to implement, but the effects of the SONAS project have been important. We feel that we have been able to influence 'practice' rather than policy, for example, by making implementation of policy more humane. This has been taken into account by the authorities."*

AN EQUAL SAY FOR ALL

The empowerment of all actors involved in the SONAS partnership was a priority from the very beginning. The SONAS project itself was set up through a formalised partnership process which gave everyone an equal say. This was applied at board, staff and policy levels, with each partner playing an equal part. For example, the management structure which was set up at the beginning of the project ensured that each partner played a significant role in the project's implementation: issues were discussed between all members of the team, and not only at management level, to ensure the active involvement of all members. The management structure was also given a flexible arrangement to allow for the rotation of the chair and vice-chair every six months, and venues for meetings were also rotated.

The partnership consciously adopted inclusive empowerment strategies to help individuals or groups develop and use power for themselves. The establishment of local networks, for example, gave asylum seekers the opportunity to come together and actively participate in these groups. Asylum seekers were also included in the policy debate. When preparing policy papers and proposals, asylum seekers as well as other actors were invited to contribute their views and participate by using a qualitative approach of open-ended questions allowing participants to set the agenda themselves and voice their issues of concern. Three asylum seekers also sat on the policy review sub-committee which had a broad membership. Assistance with transport and childcare was offered to make their participation possible.



"The project partners came from very diverse backgrounds, which gave the opportunity to each member to get insight from others. For this reason, the possibilities of networking were also particularly notable," explained Brian Moore of the Vincentian Refugee Centre, one of the SONAS partners.

NETWORKING ACROSS BORDERS

Another important objective of the SONAS partnership was to establish transnational exchanges which would be relevant to all actors participating in the project. Membership and participation in the ASPIRE! transnational partnership, which brought together EQUAL projects working with asylum seekers in five different EU countries, proved to be especially beneficial. As SONAS was the first EQUAL partnership working with asylum seekers in Ireland, everything had to be set up 'from scratch' at the start-up of the project. Participation in ASPIRE! offered the valuable opportunity for project members to look for support and learn from the experiences of other projects working with asylum seekers in other EU countries.

Together, members of the transnational partnership agreed on and worked towards a common policy agenda on the EU level. Though it was a challenge to work with partners with differing views and their own distinct objectives, the partnership was successful in publishing several policy documents highlighting issues of relevance to all transnational partners. This included matters such as the health needs of asylum seekers, social inclusion and anti-discrimination and how to better address the needs of asylum seekers.

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