

## Migration and Integration: the Impact of NGOs on Future Policy Development in Ireland

### Background

Only in the last decade has Ireland found itself a country of net immigration: an attractive destination for labour migrants, asylum seekers and international students, and subsequently for family reunion. Initially lacking the legislative and administrative framework for managing either migration or integration, successive governments have introduced a raft of policy reforms. A relatively liberal system has in some respects become increasingly restrictive, despite the efforts of a growing number of non governmental organisations (NGOs) to represent the interests of migrants. NGOs perceive themselves to have had only limited influence on policy development. This raises questions about the political context in which policies are developed and about the strategies which NGOs adopt to inform them, which the study set out to explore.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the capacity of NGOs to inform and influence future policy development on immigration, asylum, integration and citizenship issues. The study was funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, a significant funder of NGOs working on migration issues in Ireland. Set in the context of current policies and potential reforms, it explored opportunities within the Irish political and policy making system for NGOs to influence policy and the type of interventions that could be effective. It focussed on the challenges faced by NGOs in maximising their influence and identified ways in which, collectively and individually, they could exert greater influence in future. The report concludes with recommendations for government, NGOs and organisations funding NGOs in the migration sector.

### Methods

Following a review of relevant literature, a mapping of departmental responsibilities for migration in government and of NGOs with a significant policy remit in the field, the report was based on 38 interviews involving 57 interviewees from 16 NGOs, seven government departments and two statutory agencies, two parliamentarians, two international migration bodies, four social partners (employers and trade unions), and three academics, an independent consultant and a journalist. Emerging findings were presented to a seminar of NGO representatives prior to completion of the report.

### Key Findings

A review of the literature on NGOs and the policy making process in Western democracies suggests that there are five broad sets of factors which determine the influence that NGOs can have on national policy making: factors external to government which put it under pressure to change policy or limit its capacity to do so; factors internal to the executive which make Ministers and officials more or less open to external influence; the accessibility of official and unofficial channels through which NGOs can communicate with policy makers; the accessibility of organisations that provide indirect channels to policy makers including the legislature, media and organisations influential with government; and the internal capacity of NGOs to take advantage of those opportunities.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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A review of migration trends and policy developments finds that Ireland has entered a period of reform in which a narrow focus on control has been replaced by a broader aspiration to establish a more coherent system of managed migration. There is likely to remain a level of demand for migrant workers; migration for family reunion will rise, and evidence of irregular migration will keep control on the agenda. Public opposition to migration has not matched levels in some other EU states but has the potential to rise. Following the introduction of a National Action Plan against Racism there is some recognition within government of the need for a broader integration strategy.

Ireland has a relatively open political system with opportunities for NGOs to engage at all levels. The National Social Partnership, which includes members from the voluntary and community sector, offers one direct channel of influence. Differing responsibilities and priorities between government departments provide opportunities to inform competing agendas. While some officials are sceptical of the value of engagement with NGOs, they acknowledge that government needs NGOs to fulfil ten distinct roles, a need which can provide NGOs with opportunities to inform the policy making process. Government needs: information (e.g. about migrants and their needs, to develop appropriate services); evidence, to build a robust evidence base for policy making; ideas, when a problem has been identified and solutions are needed; early warning; service provision; access to migrants, for consultation; legitimacy (derived from being seen to engage with NGOs); constructive criticism; to ease pressure on the system (through NGO casework); and political support.

The migration NGO sector is small, young and growing; marked by variety in roles, structure and approach. For some a primary objective is policy reform, for others that objective is secondary to advice and service provision. There is a degree of consensus among NGO representatives and officials that NGOs do not always take full advantage of opportunities that exist to influence policy development, however there are differences of view or emphasis on why that may be the case.

The study identified five broad sets of factors which are affecting the capacity of NGOs to exert influence: the degree of cooperation within the NGO sector; the legitimacy of the NGO in the eyes of policy makers (dependent on the NGO's expertise, quality of service provision and whom it represents); its internal organisational capacity (including staff expertise and resources); the strength of its evidence base; and its strategy. Within strategy, the study identified challenges for NGOs in relation to their choice of objectives (e.g. whether focused, deliverable); relationship with policy makers (including tone and levels of trust); choice of target audiences and of strategic partners; and the lines of argument used to persuade.

The full report and executive summary will be made available on the COMPAS website at <http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/publications/Reports.shtml>

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