

## Immigrant Work Strategies and Networks in London – Turkish Sample

### Background

In Britain today there is a perception that asylum seekers and irregular migrants are driving the growth of a hitherto non-existent informal economy. Deregulated labour markets lead to flexible and casualized labour and this in turn can lead to high and low wage sectors, unregulated work and an informal sector. The public perception is that immigrants and other ethnic minorities are the direct cause of these effects. These groups are seen to be hiding from the law - through tax evasion, through circumvention of labour laws, by being instrumental in lowering wages and by defrauding the public purse through social security scams. While there seems to be a moral panic about asylum seekers and the asylum process, the 'pull' factors in the UK economy and policies that attract irregular migrants and undocumented workers have been, until recently, conveniently ignored. Some governments have chosen to ignore parts of the informal sector in order to allow some industries or firms to compete in the international markets and to subdue protest about inadequate delivery of services and jobs.

### Methodology

This project aims to investigate the role of immigrant work strategies and their networks in the process of integration into the UK, and specifically in London. Additionally, by charting the work strategies (including formal and informal work) of several groups of recently arrived immigrants to the UK to explore how these strategies are shaped or mediated by their social networks. It focused on four immigrant groups – Ghanaians, Portuguese, Romanians and Turkish – and one sample of British-born people. The research involved surveys, in-depth interviews with 155 respondents and informal interviews with other relevant parties such as community associations, local government officers and NGOs.

The **relevance and significance** of this project was three-fold. Firstly, we aimed to provide in-depth knowledge about immigrant work strategies and trajectories in a globalized and segmented labour market. Secondly, we sought to illustrate the importance of immigrant social networks, both transnational and local, in the process of settlement and immigrant accommodation into a culturally diverse society. Thirdly, such research aimed to highlight the importance of processes of immigrant participation and inclusion in a culturally diverse society.

### Key Findings

In the first instance two key concepts, irregularity and solidarity, were examined based on the preliminary findings of the overall *Immigrant Work Strategies and Networks* project. Irregularity can refer to immigration status or to the position of immigrants within the labour market.

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.

[www.compas.ox.ac.uk](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk)

- The main sites of employment for the Turkish sample appeared to be restaurants, grocers and off-licence shops, cafes, hairdressers, photo studios, music stores and bookshops. Turkish immigrants also work as au pairs, drivers, or as professionals in firms.
- Our sample revealed some down-ward mobility and de-skilling. Doctors and engineers, teachers and accountants have lost their skills either through non-acceptance of their qualifications in the UK, through the long wait for refugee status and through irregular immigration status.
- Others have escaped into the ethnic business niche, either to avoid unemployment or due to the unavailability of factory work.
- Some Turkish immigrants indicated their scepticism concerning the upward mobility of shopkeepers by saying that factory work where one works regular hours and receives regular pay is superior to ethnic businesses where fierce intra-communal competition reduces profit margins considerably.
- A significant finding of the project is the flexibility or fluidity with which immigrants move between regularity and irregularity.
- Our results are similar to Levitt's (2001) who found that 'mistrustful solidarity' - where family and community ties are strong but are accompanied by a high degree of scepticism - is a notable component of the community solidarity.
- Our results indicate, however, that community solidarity needs to be differentiated. Just as different communities have different reasons for migrating to London, immigrant solidarity is both differentiated and also works through different kinds of networks.
- Community solidarity has changed - what is left of a more intense understanding of solidarity in the village is a simple safety net in London, which is only in place if one is destitute or in great trouble – creating what we call *flexible solidarity*. There is not only a growing feeling of individualism but also a greater tolerance of inequalities and status differences among co-villagers in London.
- Community solidarity also incorporates helping compatriots out by providing them with employment that is quite exploitative. This phenomenon of a persistent socio-economic relationship in which ostensibly altruistic acts are undertaken in expectation of employing the labour of the recipient for personal benefit, profit, or gain without adequate compensation we call *exploitative solidarity*.

**Researchers:** Dr Ellie Vasta, Dr Aykan Erdemir (METU, Ankara, Turkey)

**Research assistants:** Ms Cemre Erciyas, Ms Nicole Silverman, and Mr Besim Can Zirh.

**Funder:** ESRC – COMPAS flagship project

**Output:** This part of the project has appeared as a COMPAS *Working Paper* WP-07-42; and as a chapter in the book: Erdemir, A and Vasta, E (2007), 'Work Strategies among Turkish Immigrants in London: differentiating irregularity and solidarity' in *Irregular Migration, Informal Labour and Community in Europe*, Erik Berggren, Branka Likic-Brboric, Gülay Tokzös and Nicos Trimikliniotis (eds), Maastricht: Shaker Verlag.

**Report Author:**

Dr Ellie Vasta [ellie.vasta@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ellie.vasta@compas.ox.ac.uk)