



COMPAS



Summary Report

**Migration and Integration:**  
**The Impact of NGOs on**  
**Future Policy Development**  
**In Ireland**

Sarah Spencer  
July 2006



### **About the author**

Sarah Spencer is Associate Director of the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society at the University of Oxford.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study was funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, a significant funder in the migration field in Ireland. The author is grateful to Atlantic Philanthropies for proposing that this work be undertaken. The author would also like to thank the many individuals in NGOs, government departments and other organisations who contributed to the study by giving generously of their time for interview, in correspondence and in comments on the draft. None are named in the study in order to protect the confidentiality of which they were assured.



**The purpose of this study** was to investigate the capacity of non governmental organisations (NGOs) to inform the development of national policies on migration in Ireland, here taken to include policies on immigration, asylum, integration and citizenship. In the context of current policies and likely future developments, and the opportunities and constraints in the Irish political system, the report assesses the strengths and limitations of existing NGO strategies. It identifies initiatives that NGOs and the government could take to enhance the capacity of NGOs to inform future policy development. It does not explore their capacity needs as advice and service providers, nor relationships with policy makers or service providers at the local level. The research was completed in the Autumn of 2005.

Following a review of relevant literature and mapping of departmental responsibilities for migration in government and of NGOs with a significant policy remit in this field, the basis of the study was 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), three academics, an independent consultant and a journalist.

The report briefly reviews the literature on NGOs and the policy making process in Western democracies. Within each country the factors which determine outcomes in different policy fields vary. Policy fields such as migration, transport or health operate within different opportunities and constraints and provide varying scope for using alternative policy levers. The relative influence of politicians, officials and interest groups in each field, the process through which decisions are taken, and the official arrangements or informal networks through which officials and interest groups engage, differ. The decision making processes related to migration in Ireland and the balance of influence between stakeholders will thus not necessarily be the same as in other policy areas.

The section concludes by identifying five broad sets of factors which determine the opportunities for influence by NGOs on national policy making (see Box 1). The rest of the report explores those factors in relation to the influence of NGOs on migration policies in Ireland.

## Migration trends and policy development

The report provides a brief overview of recent and likely future migration trends and identifies the drivers, opportunities and constraints which provide the context for policy development.

### Box 1: Five broad sets of factors which determine opportunities for influence by NGOs on national policy

- Factors **external to government** which put it under pressure to change policy or limit its capacity to do so
- Factors **internal to the government and civil service** which make Ministers and officials more or less open to influence
- The **accessibility of the official and unofficial channels** through which NGOs can communicate with these policy makers.
- The **accessibility of organisations that provide indirect channels** to Ministers and civil servants including the legislature, media, and bodies influential with government
- Factors relating to the **capacity of NGOs** to take advantage of those opportunities, including the degree of cooperation across the sector and the legitimacy, capacity, evidence base and strategies adopted by individual NGOs

Ireland became a country of immigration only in the last decade with rising numbers first of asylum seekers, then migrant workers and students. Unprepared, the government's response in legislation and administration arguably lacked coherence, long term direction or the infrastructure for efficient administration. It has now entered a period of reform: a narrow focus on control replaced by an aspiration to establish a more coherent system of managed migration.

Despite the expanding migrant workforce provided by EU enlargement, there is likely to remain a level of demand for non EU migrant workers in Ireland. Evidence of exploitation has embarrassed the government as have delays in the administration of visas and applications for citizenship status. Evidence of irregular migration, including unauthorized employment of international students, is likely to keep an emphasis on control firmly on the agenda. Migration for family reunion and union will rise as some temporary migrants extend their stay into permanent residence.

Public attitudes to migration have not matched the levels of concern in some other European states but all recognise the potential for hostility to rise and tensions to damage community relations. Following introduction of a National Action Plan Against Racism there is some recognition in government of the need for a broader strategy for the economic and social integration of migrants.

Policy development is constrained, to an extent, by Ireland's international human rights obligations, by EU directives and requirements (despite a negotiated 'opt-out'), and by the importance of retaining the Common Travel Area with the UK.

Ireland became a country of immigration only in the last decade with rising numbers first of asylum seekers, then migrant workers and students

## Policy making on migration

The report examines the policy making structures and processes relevant to migration policy in Ireland to identify channels through which NGOs could exert influence.

Ireland broadly follows the ‘Westminster model’ in which the government dominates the legislature but is ultimately dependent on it for support. The section considers the relative influence of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Ministers and officials and the opportunities that a relatively open political system provides for NGOs to engage with them. The multi-member constituency PR voting system has resulted in near permanent coalition government since 1981. It also makes politicians highly sensitive to public opinion at the local level. Pressure to focus on the immediate concerns of the electorate can take precedence over debates on long term policy development.

The Oireachtas (parliament) has limited though potentially growing influence on government policy. The capacity to ask parliamentary questions, to question a Minister directly, and the growing influence of parliamentary committees are identified as significant. The Dáil and Seanad are valued by NGOs as sources of information and as a means to put migration issues on the public and political agenda.

The National Social Partnership, in which there is a community and voluntary sector ‘pillar’, provides significant scope for some NGOs to participate in negotiations with government on its forward pro-

Some officials are sceptical of the value of engagement with NGOs. NGOs have in turn had experiences which have led them to question the sincerity of government consultation.

gramme and subsequent progress reviews. Views are polarised on the actual influence of NGOs and on the long term impact of this formal partnership approach. The principal NGOs focusing on migration are not currently members of the pillar. Migration, nevertheless, is a significant issue in the negotiations for the forthcoming agreement, and is likely to be so in years to come.

An overview of departmental responsibilities for migration issues demonstrates the range of departments involved, and the sometimes competing agendas that provide NGOs with opportunities for influence.

Some officials actively engage with NGOs on a regular basis beyond the parameters of the Social Partnership. Others are sceptical of the value of engagement with NGOs. NGOs have in turn had experiences which have led them to question the sincerity of government consultation. It was also apparent from interviews with officials, however, that policy makers need NGOs to fulfil a range of roles (though the state is not necessarily willing to provide any resources in return). Their needs can provide NGOs with opportunities to inform and influence the policy making process. Box 2 describes what policy makers say they need.

NGOs can also influence Ministers and officials indirectly through the media and through organizations which themselves influence policy, including statutory agencies, employers, trade unions, and the Catholic Church.

### Box 2: What policy makers say they need from NGOs

- **Information:** about migrants and their needs, for instance, in order to develop appropriate services
- **Evidence:** to build a robust, authoritative evidence base for policy making
- **Ideas:** when a problem has been identified, well argued and feasible policy solutions are needed
- **Early warning:** to identify a problem before it comes to government’s attention
- **Service provision:** where services to migrants can more effectively be provided by a non-governmental body
- **Access:** to migrants, for consultation
- **Legitimacy:** to be seen to be engaging with NGOs
- **Constructive criticism:** to learn from a constructive critic
- **Ease pressure on the system:** where NGOs’ casework or service provision enables the system to function
- **Political support:** providing political cover to a Minister or support to an agency in its negotiations with another part of government

## Capacity of the migration NGO sector to influence policy

The migration NGO sector is small, young and growing. The sector is marked by variety in roles, structure and approach, and by differing relationships of individual NGOs with policy makers. Some NGOs focus on a particular category of migrants, others on a set of issues such as health or integration. For some a primary objective is policy reform, for others that objective is secondary to provision of advice or services.

Some officials are impressed by the approach that particular NGOs take and acknowledge their influence. There is also scepticism regarding the legitimacy of others and some criticism of their tactics. There is a degree of consensus among NGO representatives and officials that NGOs do not always take advantage of the opportunities that exist to influence policy development, but some difference of emphasis on the reasons why that may be the case.

The study explored the factors which the literature and interviewees identified as most important in

NGO capacity to influence. Five broad factors were identified:

- Degree of cooperation (not uniformity) within the NGO sector
- Legitimacy of the NGO in the eyes of policy makers
- Internal organisational capacity, including resources
- Strength of its evidence base
- Strategy

While there is a degree of cooperation across the sector and close working relationships between some NGOs, interviewees reported a level of competition for profile and resources, some tensions in over-lapping roles, and differences of view on strategy.

Where the legitimacy of NGOs was questioned by officials, three sources of legitimacy were identified (see figure 1): the extent to which an organisation was genuinely representative of migrants or other sections of public opinion; its level of expertise; and the value of the services that it provides. The organisations with the broadest level of representation, depth of expertise and record as a provider of quality services to migrants, carry most authority in the eyes of policy makers. The absence of a strong migrant voice in an organisation was identified as a weakness by all sides.

The strength of an organisation's internal capacity was identified as dependent on its staff and non executive board, funding, internal unity, and capacity for self evaluation. In each case the study identified strengths and limitations.

The lack of an authoritative evidence base was widely recognised as a limitation and was a source of criticism by officials. NGOs and academics emphasised the paucity of official data on which such

an evidence base can be built. Organisations providing advice and services were frustrated at their limited resources to collate evidence from their own client base. Partnerships with academics were seen as one means to enhance capacity for evidence and analysis.

In relation to broader dimensions of strategy, challenges were identified under five headings:

- Choice of objectives
- Relationship with policy makers (including issues of style and trust)
- Target audiences
- Strategic partners
- Lines of argument

In relation to objectives, NGOs recognised that they had a tendency to take on too many issues, spreading their resources too thinly. Some were criticised for focusing on unattainable objectives which policy makers could easily dismiss, at the expense of deliverable, piece-meal reforms. While some NGO representatives had constructive personal relationships with policy makers and could discuss significant areas of disagreement, there was in other cases a lack of trust among officials in the accuracy of evidence provided to them or that the confidentiality of the information they shared would always be respected.

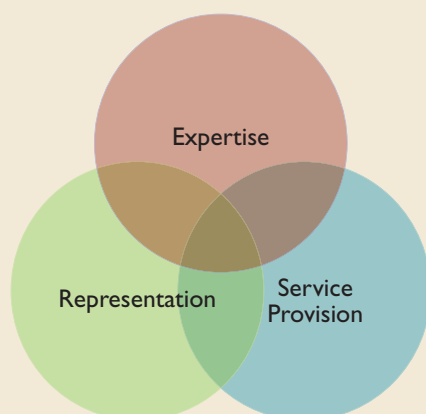
Discussion on target audiences and on potential strategic partners raised questions for political judgement – whether, for instance, a direct focus on addressing public attitudes or on securing professional bodies as allies in a campaign could repay the resource invested. In some cases, it was suggested, such an initiative would need to be a collective effort across a number of NGOs to achieve the scale of intervention necessary.

On international target audiences, there was engagement by NGOs at UN and EU level. Views differed on the value of addressing EU policy makers on the most contentious issues of immigration control; more confidence was expressed in relation to social inclusion and discrimination. Value was identified in using the international human rights machinery to highlight potential lack of compliance in Ireland.

Finally, on lines of argument, the study identified the importance of a focus on solutions; on seeing the issue not only from the migrant perspective if to be able to converse with policy makers on their own terms; the need to choose arguments that are influential with the particular audience that the NGO is seeking to persuade; and the equal need for care in voicing criticism in a way that is palatable to the listener, if the criticism is not to be ignored.

NGOs with the broadest level of representation, depth of expertise and record as a provider of services carry most authority in the eyes of policy makers

**Figure 1: Factors influencing policy makers' perception of NGO legitimacy**



## Recommendations

Concluding recommendations focus exclusively, as did the study, on the role of NGOs in relation to policy making at the national level, not on their capacity as advice and service providers, nor on the content of policy itself. Most of the recommendations are directed at NGOs but influence is a two way process. There are steps that government could take to facilitate a more constructive relationship with NGOs from which policy makers would also benefit.

### Government could:

1. Publicly acknowledge the importance of the full range of functions fulfilled by NGOs in relation to migrants; and review public funding of the sector to ensure that NGOs have access to resources to fulfil all of the roles which government itself considers of value, including funding for services, skills training and other forms of capacity building.
2. Improve the collection and transparency of data on all categories of migrants in Ireland, their participation in the labour market, needs and use of public services, in order to strengthen the evidence base for policy development and for NGO policy submissions.
3. Ensure opportunities across all relevant departments for the migration NGOs (including migrant-led NGOs) to engage in genuine dialogue on the formulation and implementation of policies related to migration and integration, and to have a voice in the National Social Partnership process on those issues should they wish to do so.
4. Create more opportunities for secondments from NGOs into government departments and of officials into NGOs for shared learning and career development.

### NGOs could together consider:

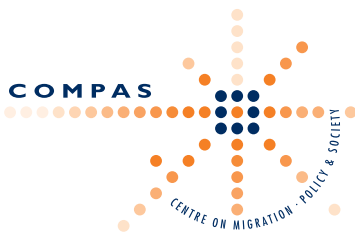
1. The potential value of an inclusive forum for dialogue across the sector, including regional organisations, chaired by a neutral moderator. A loose network, it should not attempt to coordinate action or formulate common positions – there are some fora that already exist for that purpose – but to facilitate information sharing, foster bi-lateral cooperation, strengthen the voice of organisations outside of Dublin, and help avoid overlapping roles and duplication of effort. Such a forum need not detract from the alliances that migration NGOs have with organisations working on poverty, inclusion, children, health and education issues – some of whom might also find it useful to participate in a migration network.
2. A joint strategy to address public opinion, each NGO addressing the constituencies at national and local level with which it is likely to have most influence, and seeking the cooperation of local intermediaries which themselves have influence with those audiences.
3. A communications strategy for the media which seeks to address negative coverage of migration related issues, with some consistent messages from across the sector (based on research to assess impact), while drawing the attention of editors to the potential implications for community relations of using inflammatory language.
4. Cooperation between the advice agencies on developing a test case strategy, identifying the kinds of cases which could have most impact and cooperation in seeking and supporting those cases, including the costs involved.
5. Exploring the scope for cooperation between agencies that provide advice and/or services to monitor case information according to an agreed template – in order to develop a shared evidence base which, by combining the evidence from different agencies, could be large enough to be influential.
6. Exploring options for staff training and development in the sector, including through university post graduate provision, opportunities provided by DETE's skills training fund, and through separate initiatives.

**Individually, NGOs could:**

1. Consider ways to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of policy makers (without losing credibility in the eyes of their members and supporters), whether by strengthening the input from migrants and/or individuals with credibility with different constituencies; by developing their expertise; or by increasing the contribution they are seen to make to service provision (recognising that each option can have significant resource implications).
2. Review their objectives to ensure that they anticipate future opportunities and constraints before choosing deliverable goals.
3. Review their strategy for influence: their target audiences – including a broader range of government departments (to embed migration in mainstream programmes); their line of argument for those audiences and consistency in approach in their relationships with policy makers.
4. Take advantage of the government's concern to stay in line with EU policy by highlighting its commitments at EU level on social exclusion and integration issues, including the Common Basic Principles on the Integration of Migrants where they extend beyond the commitments in the National Action Plan against Racism.
5. Be more opportunistic in taking up opportunities to exert influence through organisations which themselves have influence where that approach will help them to achieve their objectives.
6. Strengthen their evidence base by securing resources for research, more effective monitoring of advice and service provision, engaging in advice and or service provision as a means to obtain an evidence base, or commissioning research from external experts. Cooperation with academics should potentially be at arm's length in order to avoid undermining the independence and credibility of the academics' research by too close an association with the NGO's campaign objectives.
7. Inform the manifestos of all political parties prior to the general election while avoiding association with any particular party.
8. Ensure that material provided to Parliamentarians and other stakeholders is concise, accessible and addresses the issues in a way that is useful in practice to the audience for which it is intended.
9. Develop evidence based, workable proposals to tackle the policy issues that will need to be on the government's future agenda, such as the regularisation of those migrants whose immigration status is irregular but will not be removed from the country.
10. Develop measures to train, develop and retain their staff, and to draw to a greater extent on external expertise – recognising that they can only do so if they receive the resources for that capacity building.
11. Evaluate the tangible outcomes from their work on a regular basis and feed the results into discussions on their priorities and forward agenda.

**Organisations funding the migration NGO sector could:**

1. Fund independent research in Ireland to provide an authoritative evidence base for the NGOs to use, for instance on the economic contribution which migrants make to Ireland's economy; or evidence which would inform NGOs' strategy, such as data on public attitudes, the sources of attitudes, and the lines of argument or messages which different sections of the public find persuasive.
2. Provide the technical expertise and staff resources to those NGOs which provide advice and services to the public to enable them to develop a shared data base on the problems which migrants are experiencing, to make an analysis of that data public in an accessible form on an annual basis (with appropriate data protection safeguards), and to disseminate policy proposals that arise from it.
3. Consult on the value of an annual summer school or alternative means to offer training to NGOs on all aspects of campaign strategies, drawing on expertise from within Ireland but also from other jurisdictions. Participation in the course, if highly regarded, could be valued on the CV of individuals seeking appointment or promotion within the sector.
4. Respond to the need for funding in the migrant led sector, including local organisations, so that migrants can increasingly exert influence directly on policy, complementing the role of other organisations.
5. Encourage debate among independent foundations and state agencies funding NGO work and NGO recipients about issues of common interest including gaps in funding and the optimal level and mode of engagement of a funder in the operation of recipients. Dialogue, whether multi- or bi-lateral, should be conducted in a manner which enables NGOs to express their views without jeopardising their sources of income.



The **Centre on Migration, Policy and Society** 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.  
<http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk>



The **Economic & Social Research Council** is the UK's largest funding agency for research and postgraduate training relating to social and economic issues. It provides independent, high-quality, relevant research to business, the public sector and Government.  
<http://www.esrc.ac.uk>

**Published by:**

The Centre on Migration, Policy and Society  
University of Oxford  
58 Banbury Road  
Oxford, OX2 6QS  
Tel.: +44 (0) 1865 274711  
Fax.: +44 (0) 1865 274718  
Web: <http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk>  
Email: [info@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:info@compas.ox.ac.uk)

The full report, *Migration and Integration: The Impact of NGOs on Future Policy Development in Ireland (2006)* can be downloaded from <http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/publications/>. Citations should refer to the full report.

All rights reserved.