

## A Decent Work Agenda

Large flows of migration to the UK have been a constant feature of British life throughout the post-war period. Until the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, all Commonwealth citizens were able to enter the UK without restriction, helping to fill skills shortages throughout the forties, fifties and early sixties. Harold Macmillan's famous remark during the 1959 election campaign "let us be frank about it – most of our people have never had it so good" was, in part, a tribute to the economic success that migration had brought.

Forty years later, most of the Commonwealth immigration routes had been closed off. During the 1990s, a new generation of migrants emerged who often did not speak English and whose affinity with British cultural values was not as strong. Unlike Commonwealth migrants who had arrived from several well-known points of origin, they were from hugely diverse backgrounds – from Africa to the Balkans. In contrast to previous migrants, a high proportion came as asylum-seekers, and were therefore far more vulnerable than those who had an immediate right to work and could build new lives.

At the same time as the asylum system has become ever more precarious, the Government's "managed migration" policies have expanded the economic routes for migrants, whilst also restricting their entitlement to benefits and state support. Opportunities have opened up for legal migration in sectors including health and care services, agriculture and food processing, hotels and catering. But these sectors are often poorly regulated and leave migrants vulnerable to exploitation, particularly as women form a high proportion of those entering these routes.

Since the Eastward expansion of the European Union in May 2004, the 447,000 people who have registered to work in the UK have dwarfed these tailored migration schemes. Though this wave of immigration has been widely seen as successful, these migrants – with limited English speaking skills and no right to state support – have been vulnerable to exploitation and to employers paying them less than the minimum wage.

*'We are seeing the emergence of broad based coalitions involving migrant groups, trade unions and traditional working class people campaigning together for a 'decent wage.' Forcing migrants into unregulated markets makes them vulnerable to exploitation and undermines the minimum wage. We need to fight together to fight for justice.'*

**Sukhvinder Stubbs, Chief Executive  
of Barrow Cadbury Trust**

Over the last ten years, the immigration system has become increasingly harsh, with access to legal aid limited and rights of appeal curtailed. While this has brought the number of asylum claims down, it has only increased the vulnerability of migrants. The emphasis on migrant control has produced a tangle of rules and regulations that are seldom properly understood by the workers, their employers, or even the immigration control authorities themselves. Long drawn out procedures for determining asylum applications, during which time refugees are required to live on low levels of income with few opportunities for employment, produce situations in which chronic depression becomes common. With both main political parties now discussing annual limits on immigrants, this migration control agenda looks set to continue.

## Planning the labour market

In November 2006, Mervyn King, the Governor of the Bank of England, said a lack of reliable figures on the numbers of migrants in Britain made it impossible to predict the impact of the labour market on the economy. He admitted that "it may be that the statistics are not giving an accurate reading." Local authorities rely on Census-based data which underestimates or simply does not include migrants. Barrow Cadbury is currently developing research looking at ways of better reflecting actual local migrant populations. Without accounting for the numbers or the needs of migrants it is not possible to accurately plan the labour market or the level of funding needed to maintain local services.

*'Migrants are the missing voice in the national discussion about the future of immigration policy at the present time. Yet the motivations of over a half million new migrants each year are speculated about by politicians and media pundits without them ever talking to us about our aspirations as residents of Britain today.'*

**Arten Llazari, Manager, Wolverhampton Asylum Seeker and Refugee Service**

## Why migrant voices have been missing from the debate

A new generation of migrant groups have emerged from the new wave of migration in the nineties and beyond. These groups have done valuable work but are too small, focused on local issues and overwhelmed by casework to be able to effectively campaign for changes in national policy.

Unlike discussions on issues such as social exclusion, poverty and homelessness, the experiences and views of migrants have often been missing from public policy debates. NGOs and think-tanks are often called on to represent a migrant viewpoint in policy and media discussions rather than migrants themselves. There is a gap between the rhetoric of "partnership" with migrant groups adopted by public bodies and the subordinate reality of migrant organisations in policy-making.

Asylum-seekers, in particular, have been caught between contradictory national policies designed to "send a tough message" to would-be asylum seekers and policies run by local authorities aimed at promoting social exclusion. A strong migrant voice is needed to challenge these contradictory approaches.

*'The Government must work with groups such as the Migrants' Rights Network, local councils, community groups, trade unions and those who deal with migrants on a daily basis. It must give genuine consideration to how social cohesion and justice – issues that ought to be at the heart of any Labour administration – can be supported by Government policy.'*

**Jon Cruddas MP**

## Case study: Wolverhampton Asylum Seeker and Refugee Services (WARS)

Wolverhampton Asylum and Refugee Services (WARS) provide advice and support to asylum-seekers and refugees. The organisation was founded six years ago by two refugees, who felt that the large numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Wolverhampton were creating a huge demand for services. The Barrow Cadbury Trust initially gave them financial support.

In its short lifetime, WARS has assisted asylum-seekers and refugees from 84 different countries. The most immediate barrier faced by asylum-seekers and refugees arriving in Britain is language. Ninety-five per cent of their clients speak almost no English on arrival. However WARS have been able to interpret up to 90% of the languages spoken by their clients.

WARS run advice clinics four days a week – including a drop-in centre for women. The most pressing issue for new arrivals is usually to help them negotiate their way through the asylum policy maze – translating official letters and intervening if, for instance, support is suddenly withdrawn due to an unregistered change of address. Refugees that are granted refugee status and indefinite leave to remain need help with sorting out accommodation, validating their qualifications, understanding their benefits entitlement and finding employment.

One 19 year old from Cameroon, now studying for a marketing degree at Wolverhampton University says, "When I first arrived here WARS helped me to fill in my immigration forms. My English was very poor then. They also helped me to trace my sister – who I thought might be dead – but was alive in the UK."

A grant from Barrow Cadbury has allowed WARS to take on advocacy work – feeding their grassroots experience to wider public policy debates. As Arten Llazari says, "When the need comes through your door – and you are not the only organisation in the country that are noticing it - you realise that somehow naturally that kind of campaign becomes a priority."

Last year, WARS campaigned against cuts in legal aid for asylum seekers. WARS also successfully campaigned against a policy to only support asylum-seekers if they had immediately lodged a claim within the first hours of arrival in Britain.

One local MP holds a weekly surgery in the WARS building, and can take up individual cases with Home Office Ministers if necessary. Lucinda Hardwick, the campaign coordinator, says: "We've definitely had an influence on our local MPs. They are now much better informed about the issues and have written to the Home Office on our behalf."

WARS' advocacy work has had some success in changing the climate of local opinion. Regional publications now cover their work and, for a while at least, most have moderated their negative stories about asylum seekers. As Arten Llazari says, sometimes their work is in reminding local people that migration to the area is not a new phenomena: "A quarter of Wolverhampton's population are from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities themselves, who struggled some forty years ago. Newcomers now face exactly the same issues."

*'Migrants groups devote so much energy to tackling poverty and helping people find jobs and housing that they struggle to find time to contribute to the immigration debate. I hope that the MRN helps them to 'have their say'. There has been a huge diversity of migrants in the UK and they all face common issues.'*

**Don Flynn, Project Director  
for the Migrants' Rights Network**

## **Migrants' Rights Network:**

Barrow Cadbury have provided initial funding to establish a Migrants' Rights Network (MRN) through which grassroots groups can collectively intervene in policy debates. Over 100 migrant organisations signed up to the initiative in November 2006.

The aim of the MRN is to:

- Nurture leaders from migrant communities.
- Document the activities of groups, particularly those in greatest need of support.
- Identify issues on which migrant groups should influence policy discussions.
- Create greater awareness within Government about the essential role played by migrant groups – voices that are often missing from public policy debates.

With the assistance of a small staff, the MRN will address policy issues from the exercise of EU free movement rights to the relationship between old and new migrant communities. They are discussing launching a campaign to call for the implementation of a "decent work agenda" for migrants. One hundred migrant groups, supported by a coalition of trade unions and other social agencies, are calling for a properly regulated labour market. This will ensure that the minimum wage isn't undermined and that existing employees do not suffer downward pressure on their wages through employers employing migrants in illegal conditions. The Decent Work Agenda promotes access for all to freely chosen employment, the recognition of fundamental rights at work, and an income to enable people to meet their family responsibilities. The MRN are in discussions with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on this issue. The MRN are also likely to call – together with some companies and trade unions – for the regularisation of the estimated 500,000 undocumented migrants in Britain.

For further information on the MRN, WARS or any other grassroots groups working in partnership with Barrow Cadbury, contact Alice Murray on 020 7391 9220 or [alicemurray@barrowcadbury.org.uk](mailto:alicemurray@barrowcadbury.org.uk)