What Is Community Dialogue?
We are people from diverse communities. As a group we take no position on party-political issues. We believe that if we want a better future we need to take the time to question ourselves, listen to each other, and seek to understand each other more deeply.

Our Vision
A vibrant, just and inclusive society informed and empowered through dialogue

Our Mission
To engage people at all levels in open honest dialogue that encourages understanding

Steps into Dialogue
Community Dialogue received funding under the Special European Union Peace III Programme to deliver 'Steps into Dialogue'. The goal of this project is to use dialogue as a mechanism that enables people affected by the conflict to understand more deeply where they and others are coming from. Through this process, Community Dialogue hopes to ensure that people can move forward to a more peaceful future together.

There are two steps to the project:

Dialogue on the Ground
This provides opportunities to engage in dialogue and discuss contentious issues so that people can deal with those issues and move forward together. The project includes issue based dialogue sessions, workshops to unpack topics at a deeper level, and residential dialogues that allow more time for reflection on issues and feelings raised.

Unravelling the Jargon
This facilitates dialogue on contentious and often complex issues. It does so by producing leaflets and pamphlets that provide a simple overview of those issues together with key questions. These documents are aids to dialogue, providing opportunities for critical thinking, questioning and deepened understanding, assisting people in making informed choices about their future.

If you want to participate in a dialogue or seek further information you can contact us at:

Community Dialogue
LINC Resource Centre
218 York Street, Belfast BT15 1GY

Telephone: 028 9035 1450
Email: admin@communitydialogue.org
www.communitydialogue.org

David Holloway, Coodinator
Jim O'Neill, Dialogue Development Worker
Yvonne O'Donnell, Administrator

Charity No. NI039351

Conversations Around the Kitchen Table

*"A new Future? An opportunity to explore issues that matter to **You**."*

Conversations Around the Kitchen Table

Community Dialogue

Telephone: 028 9035 1450

admin@communitydialogue.org
Website: www.communitydialogue.org

Report compiled by
Dr. Stephanie Mitchell

Background

Community Dialogue was asked to facilitate a number of Dialogue sessions with members of the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) living in Belfast, to begin to explore the key problems and issues facing themselves and their families.

The sessions were ably led by Community Dialogue facilitators, Seamus Farrell and Stephanie Mitchell, who provided an opportunity for participants to be listened to in a safe atmosphere of mutual respect – and with no agenda. Most of the participants were from African countries and, as Seamus said, the process was “like pushing an open door.”

The sessions brought into focus the need for innovative approaches in Community Dialogue’s outreach both to minority ethnic communities and to those sectors of society effectively rendered ‘voiceless’ and thus easily excluded from the familiar ‘dominant’ discourses. They also illustrated the significance of shared food in recreating a sense of ‘family’ as the natural context for a safe place to talk, for dialogue and for the mutual support that benefits us all.

Although none of these things are likely to solve any of the very real problems faced by those seeking asylum in NI, the sessions provided an opportunity to better understand the shared nature of these experiences and thereby counter the sense of isolation felt by so many. It also gave rise to this booklet, which brings the issues to a wider audience.

This is Community Dialogue’s final publication in its ‘Steps into Dialogue’ project which was funded by the Special EU Programmes Body. It is fitting that these stories capture the essence of what Community Dialogue’s work has been about since its inception in 1997, where Dialogue is an unfolding process of transforming and deepening understanding of others and ourselves through listening, sharing and questioning.

Foreword

The biggest problem that human beings seem to have is getting on with one another - a problem that ranges from relating on a one-on-one basis to international relationships and everything in between.

Truly right relations between human beings would mean fairness and respect. Wrong human relationships lie at the heart of every distressing story we read, see or hear on “the news” – of which there often seems little else. They are the reason for poverty and violence. There is the violence associated with the struggle for basic resources for living. There is the violence that is about obtaining or retaining obscene wealth and power. And interlaced through both of these is the manipulation of humanity’s most spectacular characteristic – its diversity of identity, ethnicity, culture, values and belief systems – in the preservation of wrong relationships. Conflict entrepreneurs elevate dying and killing in this cause to a thing of glory, whilst surviving to enjoy the fruits of the carnage themselves.

The vast majority of the victims of humanity’s wrong relationships don’t survive its devastating consequences. They die at the spot – starved or slaughtered. Only a few manage to escape and many of these never make it to safety.

From among those who survive all this ‘culling’, some have made it to these shores. They have come to a place with its own sordid history of wrong relationships – to a place that, were it not for the good fortune of being located within Europe, might well have produced stories on a scale and par with those of the contributors to this booklet.

I suggest that these are important stories, more so than many of those that command the headlines and airwaves. They are personal but at the same time speak on behalf of all victims of the way the world is, of those who have not survived or are right now at risk, including their very own loved ones. They point to what ought to top the agenda of every political or

economic summit - but seldom even features. They reveal the enormous resilience of the human spirit, their personal heroic struggle to move on from trauma and out of victimhood. They speak from the wisdom of lived experience about the things that matter – belonging, safety. In their appreciation of being alive, of having enough, they have things to teach us.

Such voices however are seldom heard. Besides being considerably isolated by regulatory requirements, limited resources and language difficulties, they live in a society whose renowned expertise in sectarianism, the first cousin of racism, makes interaction with mainstream society a risky business for strangers. In consequence, people who live among us with much to teach us all about values and priorities, are voiceless - hence the importance of this booklet.

Partnership between the Northern Ireland Council for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS), Community Dialogue and City Church Belfast enabled the conversations to take place around a kitchen table that have resulted in this booklet. Those who shared their stories and Stephanie Mitchell who gathered them with such sensitivity and respect deserve our gratitude. These are stories that demand change in the way the world is, and point to the potential in humanity to effect change. They have to do with right relations, the central issue in this society and world-wide.

Seamus Farrell

Conversations Around the Kitchen Table

Introduction

Where in the world?
Most of us have family members or friends who have moved away at some time to live or work elsewhere in the world. The reasons can include 'pull' factors such as better job prospects, education or training opportunities, an improved standard of living, a sense of adventure, a better climate or the chance to join family members already settled elsewhere. Sometimes an individual may choose to work abroad for a period, sending money back home to support others. They are lucky if they speak the appropriate language, can understand what is going on around them and, in turn, make themselves understood.

A better life?
'Push' factors, on the other hand, can be due to wanting to escape intolerant attitudes, or worse. Sometimes it is the fear of losing our own lives. Whatever the combination of 'pull' or 'push' factors, they are all driven by the desire, in some way, to find a better life. We leave in the hope of many things including security – and justice. And who doesn't want that for themselves or their family?

Can you imagine...
- being forced to leave your home, with little if any notice, taking only what you could carry?
- not knowing whether you would ever return?
- leaving behind loved ones - sometimes your own children?
- enduring long, dangerous journeys lasting days or weeks or even months with little food or water, no sanitation, nowhere to sleep and sharing a cramped space with strangers?
- being haunted on a daily basis by the images and experiences that forced you to leave?

- finding your feet in a place where you may know nothing of the language or the culture?

This is the reality for some of the people you meet on the streets of Northern Ireland (NI). They arrive in the hope of finding sanctuary or asylum.

What is an asylum seeker?
An asylum seeker is a person looking for a place of sanctuary outside her/his own country. People seek asylum if they fear persecution in their own country due to their ethnicity, nationality, religion, social group or political opinion. In 1951, the UK signed the UN Refugee Convention and agreed to allow people to seek asylum here. Those applying have the legal right to be here while their application is considered. Someone who applies for asylum and is successful is granted refugee status.

Asylum seekers in NI
- Applications for asylum are handled by the United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA)
- UKBA currently attempts to make a decision within 6 months of the claim
- However, some cases take years to process
- Persons seeking sanctuary must demonstrate to the UKBA that they would be at risk on return
- It can be hard for some to provide the necessary evidence and obtaining documents and information from overseas can sometimes be extremely difficult
- On average, 27% of recent claims are currently successful*
- The period of awaiting a decision is one of great uncertainty
- While awaiting a decision, persons seeking sanctuary are given accommodation in hostels, flats or shared houses
- This accommodation has no connection to NIHE waiting lists
- All adults seeking sanctuary are also required to report regularly to the UKBA to sign their name

*based on UK-wide quarterly figures for initial decisions in the period Q1, 2010 – Q2, 2011 (Refugee Council Information, October 2011)

- Arrests can be made at this point - with no opportunity to pack a bag of essentials
- If the person lives within 3 miles of the UKBA office, no travel assistance is available and most make their own way on foot
- Subsistence for adults is approximately £35 per week to cover food, toiletries, clothes, mobile top-ups etc. Some receive cash, however, others receive prepaid cards that can only be used in certain shops
- Persons seeking sanctuary are not allowed to do paid work
- Many arrive in Northern Ireland almost by accident and usually not through choice

General experience

Anxiety / uncertainty
Many persons seeking sanctuary live with a constant sense of anxiety – about their situations, their family and friends and, particularly, the outcome of their claim, which can lead to random arrest. Many have a well-founded fear of 'authority' figures based on previous experience, making it hard to trust those who are often in positions to help them.

The desire to keep in touch with family and friends is compelling but practically difficult and sometimes prohibitively expensive.

Loneliness / isolation / dislocation
Many have made the journey to NI alone, arriving in this completely unfamiliar setting and where the whole culture at all levels can seem strange and different at the start. Things easily taken for granted by locals are not necessarily obvious to others and can be very confusing. This might include social interactions such as the 'culture' of shared space in hostel accommodation and the ways people routinely behave towards one another. Or it might be practical things such as reading signs, navigating a strange city on foot, mobile phone networks or how the bus system works. It may also be 'systems' such as healthcare, social services, legal representation, the PSNI or the UKBA. Little or no English can make it much more difficult to understand these things.

Inactivity / desire to work

Many persons seeking sanctuary have been forced to leave all that is familiar – including their homes, jobs and wider networks of family, friends and community. Cold, northerly climates are a shock for those from warmer parts of the world and the comfort of shared meals and familiar foodstuffs are often not available. Most fully expect to support themselves through work and have no expectation of benefits. Given other pressures, time and inactivity can easily become a burden.

Trauma and random brutality

Escaping brutal regimes where unprovoked attacks, and worse, are commonplace raises general levels of fear within a person that can easily surface again when something similar happens - or sounds as if it might. This booklet introduces people who have witnessed things many of us cannot imagine and who live with constant anxiety about their own situations and that of their immediate and wider family. Since living here, some continue to experience racist taunts and abuse - simply because they look different. Depending upon a person's previous history, these attacks can have a profound effect.

Learning to live with it: how would I cope?

Although names and other details have been changed, the stories that follow are all true. Some of the people in these pages, men and women alike, were moved to tears by the memories triggered in re-telling their story. As you read, ask yourself, how would you have coped? what would you have done? and, most importantly of all, having made it here to relative safety, how would you want to be treated and what would you hope for in your new life?

CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE: HALIMA'S STORY

Background

Halima lived with her mother, father and younger sister and two younger brothers in a large city. When civil war broke out in the country, the fighting was political and particularly bad in the place where they lived. Being members of the minority clan meant that 'the bigger clans will attack you, rape the women, kill the men and sometimes take you away or kidnap you.' This had already happened to a lot of people that she knew from minority clans.

'People were fighting in the streets'

Leaving all their belongings behind, the family fled to the other side of the country where they found refuge in the house of a relative. At the age of six, Halima's education was interrupted as she could no longer attend school. Instead, she had to help her mother to provide for the family by selling home-made products at the market.

'The militia used to attack us every night - this made it unsafe (again)'

Although safer than the area they had fled, the family became vulnerable once again when fighting erupted between various factions of the militia in the new city where they had settled. The family endured nightly attacks and several threats against them and but it wasn't until the death of her brothers that Halima realised that, as the first born, she would be next. She says 'I wasn't happy to stay there because one day they will kill me.' Fortunately, Halima's aunt was able to fund her escape across the border to the capital city of a neighbouring country.

'I didn't have a passport'

Despite the lack of a passport, this money enabled the border guards to be bribed.

The lorry journey took 3 days and Halima recalls that there were many other people in the lorry (old and young) all escaping for similar reasons. Most of them carried nothing at all, including passports. The driver gave out food and water to those who had paid extra 'but not to everybody'. Luckily for Halima, her aunt and the driver were friends but those who had only paid for the journey 'didn't get anything.'

'I just had the clothes I was wearing - nothing else'
When the lorry finally arrived at its destination, Halima was met by another aunt who had paid an agent to acquire a false passport and help her leave the country. She says 'I didn't know I was coming to Belfast' but could not have influenced her final destination.

'It was very, very strange'
On their arriving in Northern Ireland, the agent brought her into the city centre for a couple of hours. He told her she could seek asylum and 'just left me in a cafe' after which she remembers 'I saw some black guys and they helped me'. They said she could go to the police station, which she did.

'I had no choice'
With her small amount of English she still could not understand the officer's accent. Also, she remembers being 'very afraid' explaining that 'you are missing your family, you don't know where you are going (and) you don't know what's going to happen next.'

Memories

Reflecting on life when she arrived, Halima said 'a typical day was horrible because you can't do anything - just stay at home'. 'Because you're not allowed to work, you always think about what is going to happen (to your case).' Aware that her family needed money, she could do nothing to help support them.

'We don't have this kind of weather'
Halima has found aspects of life in NI quite different to what she was used to and had to adapt to unfamiliar patterns of weather. Despite speaking 'a little bit of English' she initially found accents hard to understand but overcame this, swiftly becoming fluent herself and 'finally got some friends.'

Her family was able to escape to a neighbouring country and are 'now also free' which is a great relief. She says 'I'm happy they are safe now. That's the most important thing.'
Initially, she says 'I was just missing my family back home' although the hardest thing all along has been 'missing my mum - I really love her.'

'I help people'
When time hung heavily on her hands, Halima found fulfilling work by volunteering at GP surgeries, in hospitals and various community organisations where her language skills, interpreting for fellow nationals, were in demand. In the absence of someone like Halima, a telephone interpreting service would be necessary and she says that, because of this, her friends, as well as the doctors and nurses, were 'very happy' to have her there. It gave her pleasure to help people who are in need.

'I just stay at home and watch the telly'
On an average day when not required to help someone, she woke at around 10.00 a.m. had breakfast and then watched television, which 'sometimes' made her happy. Later she might go shopping, visit a friend's house or perhaps be visited instead, sometimes eating together. These visits always took place during the day.

Life now

'I am happy now, in a safe place. I have a passport. I can travel.'
Since her claim for asylum was successful, Halima has since found paid work as a cleaner. She enjoys many things, particularly meeting new

people, and would love to join in more events that are held for newcomers like herself but she says 'I don't like being out in the evening, it's not my habit.' She prizes the chance of an education, having to abandon her own so early and says she would like to become a nurse or a midwife. She likes living in NI and says 'you can get people who will help you find a job.'

Halima has now lived here for two years. She is currently 22 years old. Even now, she knows that it is not safe to return to her country.

'I know if I go back, they will kill me'

Message

Her message is to encourage other young adults to take the opportunity to go to college and get a job 'because they don't have to waste their time staying home.'

CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE: HANAD'S STORY

Background

In his home country, Hanad's family did not belong to the majority group in government, but to a minority group instead. The government systematically persecuted those in the minority which had very serious consequences for Hanad whose family had two visits from the militia.

'When I lost my family'

On the first occasion, he describes having been in the house at the time when the militia arrived and 'killed my little sister', then later arrested him. On the second occasion, several months later, 'they came back again... and killed my mum and my other sister'. Away from the house at the time, Hanad hid when he saw them coming and, from his vantage point, was able to see them although they couldn't see him. Describing what he witnessed, he said 'they took my dad, injured his leg and threw him into the car'. Later, he returned to the house in the company of younger friends to find the bodies of his mum and youngest sister and that his dad had been abducted. Hanad still does not know whether his dad is alive.

'Sometimes they just kill you.'

Recounting what happened he says 'that's why I fled, because I would be next. If they came back and (had) seen me then they would kill me.' Trying to find a means of escape, he found work cleaning a restaurant (where he also slept) in exchange for food until he had saved enough money for the bus fare to a relative's house 'very far away.' He stayed with this elderly relative, a 'very, very old person', looking after her until she died, but recalls that, after that, 'I had nobody.'

At this point, a distant relative in the US sent money which enabled Hanad's safe passage away from his home country - a journey that involved several stages. Firstly he crossed the border into a neighbouring country, travelling in a lorry with livestock. Here he was met by the female agent with whom he stayed until they were due to leave. The money sent covered the cost of a false passport and he had to remember the new name and date before he could make the trip. 'Every morning when I got up she used to ask me my name and if I said "Hanad" she said "no, no!" '. Throughout, Hanad had been led to believe that he was going to travel to the US to be reunited with the distant relative who had sent the money.

'I didn't know where I was coming'

Eventually, the day came but instead of the US, they travelled to the UK. 'I think we landed in London ... and then (onward) to Belfast.' From the international airport they went to a hostel and then to a police station. Hanad well remembers that 'when I saw the police I was very afraid'. It was difficult to understand the officer because 'I didn't speak English'. Eventually a map was produced, his home country identified and an interpreter found. He says of the intepreter 'she knew I was so afraid, (and)

she said “you are safe now.”’ Meanwhile the agent left, taking with her the false passport and all other contact details of his relative in the US. Asked if he would pursue this, he says he is ‘too afraid to ask the lady.’

Reflections

Hanad only has bad memories about his home country. Many people, he says, ‘have seen children killed in front of them’ with the result that ‘they get crazy.’ He describes himself as ‘normal but just paranoid’ by comparison.

When asked what he misses most about his home country he says ‘the only things I remember...are what happened to my family. When I remember about my mum and my sisters I feel very bad.’ He would not choose to return.

Life now

Although living in NI for over three years, Hanad is still awaiting the outcome of his claim for asylum. Describing his life here as ‘OK’, he goes on to explain ‘my problem is always worrying about my case, that actually makes me talk to myself, makes me too much paranoid.’ He also suffers from bad dreams about what happened and says he used to take sleeping tablets ‘because when you think, think, think all the time, it’s exhausting.’ In addition to this, some recent health problems required him to undergo surgery.

He realises that the constant companionship of friends would make his situation easier since ‘being with friends helps me take my mind off it. We all help each other.’ They play football together, play cards, talk or watch TV. However, his friends all live in the centre of the town while he lodges some distance away. He has asked to move but been told that this is not possible until a decision is taken about his claim. In fact, Hanad lives so far away that it is difficult for him to see his friends - and keeping in touch via mobiles costs money.

Budgeting is hard since ‘I only get £35 a week - not enough for food (although) it has to pay for everything - food, toiletries, cleaning stuff, clothes etc.’ He used to attend college in the town but says ‘I stopped going because the bus fare was too expensive.’ He explains that, to get to the town, ‘that is why I sometimes walk’ although ‘it’s a very long way’ and takes him one and a half hours in each direction. It is similarly difficult for his friends to visit him.

On an average day, Hanad goes out to the local library in the morning where he uses the internet and reads books, usually staying ‘two to three hours.’ He has lunch back at home then ‘watches TV until nighttime then go to sleep.’ Unsurprisingly, he comments that ‘there is nothing to do (and) I get bored all the time.’

Hanad describes the town where he lives as ‘a really good place’, going on to explain that, by comparison, ‘it is safe here because there is fighting in my country. I feel safe.’ He holds this view despite being on the receiving end of verbal abuse and the victim of several unprovoked attacks in which eggs were thrown at him and a stone thrown through his window.
Ideally, when he imagines a possible future, Hanad says that he wants to ‘study engineering, or be a doctor or a policeman.’ This is ‘because...I don’t want what happened to me to happen to someone else.’ He wants to ‘do the good things of the world and make the people safe’ and to create ‘my own family here’. He is currently 22 years old.

Message

His message to the people of Northern Ireland is simply ‘thank you for making me feel safe because from the day I start(ed) living in Belfast, I feel safe.’

His message to the government is: ‘thanks for making me feel safe as well and I wish I would be one of the government. ’His message to the UKBA is: ‘please, I need an answer, I have been waiting too long.’

CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE: JAMILLA'S STORY

Background

'My country is not safe'
Jamilla arrived in NI after a long and difficult journey. In her country of origin, the militia had made 'a lot of problems' and her life was threatened, prompting her to escape. Like many women, she had endured physical abuse and wears its scars.

'I left my family and my son'
Like many people fleeing persecution, Jamilla's journey involved passing through a number of other countries until claiming asylum became a possibility. The first stage of her escape overland involved lorry journeys, the first of which lasted a week and that she undertook in the company of a neighbouring family from her home town. Later journeys, crossing other international borders, were longer and more difficult, involving large groups of strangers - men, women and children.

'the night is too cold, the day too hot'
She remembers one journey in particular, saying 'it was too difficult because (of) so many people from Somalia and Eritrea' who 'don't understand each other and don't have food.'

Jamilla was lucky enough to have 'sugar, water and some food' although this wasn't the case for everyone. There were no shops, no trees and the journey was almost continuous, with three drivers taking turns. Travellers were crammed together in the back of the lorry, taking it in turns such that 'some people stand up, some sit down for four to five hours then swap.'

'you have to stay near the lorry'
The lorry only stopped for one hour in every 24 during which time people stayed nearby for fear of being left behind. Others, who climbed on top to

sleep, risked falling off and being abandoned when the lorry moved on because the lorry's not stopping.' There was one occasion when the lorry did stop for 24 hours. Jamilla remembers that 'you have to wait (to see) what they will do to you.' The climate of fear ensured that the group remained silent.

'If you speak or say something, they will kill you'
Eventually they arrived at the coast. By this time, Jamilla needed medical attention but, lacking a passport or medical card, was refused treatment. Staff at the hospital told her 'if you don't have an ID card or passport we can't give you medicine.'

'throw her overboard, she is dead'
It was at this point that she decided to embark on the most hazardous part of her journey - a voyage with 30 other people in a small, open boat - hopefully to a place of safety. Determined to continue with her journey, she went ahead despite her ill-health and having been told by the owner that the boat's previous occupants had all died.

'you don't know where you're going'
By this stage, her money was all gone but although Jamilla could make no payment of her own, friends insisted that the boat's owner take her as a passenger on the basis of their payments, saying 'we'll pay but you must take Jamilla for free.' Unwell from the start, she lapsed into unconsciousness.

'sometimes the people wait (for) when they will die'
After five days out at sea, their boat was eventually spotted by a fishing vessel who then sent for assistance. Jamilla and several others were air-lifted from the open boat to an EU country where she received three blood transfusions during her month-long stay in hospital. After this, as an asylum seeker, she spent eight months in detention before a decision was made against awarding her refugee status. Jamilla was released but the court's decision meant that she was to be sent home.

Upon release, she received temporary support from a local charity but there was no question of being reunited with her son as she had hoped. It was this factor that led her to undertake the final part of her journey to the UK. The same friend who helped her acquire a false passport also advised that the UK police might be able to help with her claim.

'I arrived in Belfast by bus. I didn't know where I was'
Jamilla stayed in NI, subject to the same constraints as all others seeking asylum, until the day when, quite suddenly, she was taken into detention. Her claim for asylum elsewhere in the EU had come to light. Like all others claiming asylum, Jamilla was obliged to attend a police station on a weekly basis to sign her name. For Jamilla, this was the only really difficult thing about being here. However, she was fortunate to have a friend who routinely accompanied her for this task.

She well remembers the 'dark day' when, on arrival at the Police station, she was arrested and taken into custody. Her friend insisted that Jamilla be allowed to get her luggage including the medication for her ongoing health problems.

'When I was in detention, people helped me a lot'
Then followed another period of some weeks in detention in various parts of the UK and Scotland but by this time, her case had come to the attention of those who were able to secure a positive decision for her claim.

'Police are good people but they can't help your own problem because they say "this is the law"'

Life now

Jamilla has not seen her son since she left in 2007 but, since being awarded refugee status she now intends to apply to the UKBA for him to join her. She would like him to learn English and, in time, find a job. A keen student of English herself, Jamilla makes full use of her opportunities to attend classes and wants to become a journalist. She currently works as a cleaner.'I like the peace and that it's safe'

Reflections

As is the case for many seeking asylum, Jamilla simply says 'I miss my family'.

Message

'I like people here. They like to help me'
Jamilla is very touched by all the help and support she has received since arriving here. When asked if she has a message, she says 'I want to say thank you to all the people of Belfast'. Going on to list many by name, she concludes:

'I think these people are my family - they didn't forget me.'

CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE: PAUL'S STORY

Background

'It had become unbearable'
'I came here because of a lot of difficulties back home' Paul explains at the start of the story about his journey to NI. A professional person in his mid-thirties, Paul recounted that many people were afraid of the ruling party in his home country. Members of this ruling party were known to come to your home at 4.a.m. and take you away to attend one of their rallies, coercing you into wearing their T shirts etc. Opposition party rallies were held during the day which made their supporters more visible and thereby vulnerable. Persecution was commonplace for joining the opposition and some of Paul's relatives had already been abducted. Those associated with the

opposition were likely to have their houses burned, their children evicted from school and to lose their jobs.

He was friendly with two brothers, also members of the opposition, one of whom was abducted and the other killed. The abducted brother, who was married, had acid poured on his skin after which his chances of survival dropped to 50%. The brother's wife was 7 months pregnant at the time of the attack and later left the country and her husband died never having seen his baby daughter.

'he's my nephew, give him a passport' (corruption)
Leaving the country, however, was not at all easy. 'You had to get clearance but they had stopped producing passports unless you knew someone in the government who could exercise some influence.' Only those with a family connection were likely to succeed. Fortunately, Paul already had a passport but still had to make his way to a neighbouring country where some connection to a person you knew working at the airports or for the airlines was still necessary in order to leave. Paul chose to come to NI because he knew one of the central figures in the opposition movement in his home country who lived here at the time.

Many people resorted to desperate measures in trying to leave the country. 'A friend of mine had to swim across the huge river (marking an international boundary)' Paul recalled, only to find himself 'turned away at gunpoint by the militia' on the far side. Unless you were carrying money to bribe them, the guards would not let you land. Too tired to swim back across the river, Paul's friend was swept downstream into deeper water where he was attacked by crocodiles. His head was later identified, there being very little else left of his body. 'We went to the same school, grew up together, did the same apprenticeship. It's so sad' adding, 'I cried all night when I heard'.

Preoccupied by concern and anxiety, and with so little information about his wider family and network of friends, Paul tries to avoid going to the library but finds it hard to resist. Many of the people he grew up with are now all over the world and he can no longer sit together with them as he once did.

'I can't stop searching the internet for news' (of home)
Learning that more militia are being trained by the ruling party leaves him feeling terrified for family members who remain, since the situation is very unstable. His mum is still 'stuck there'. Having formerly worked as a cook for a family until they were evicted, his mum was then moved to a compound and later to a hut in a village. However, since the villages are mostly targeted, her home was burned down by thugs believing that she supported the opposition. In Paul's opinion 'she knows nothing about politics.'

'I can't imagine the people back home and the terrible life they have'
His mother-in-law died in 2005. Previously she had been attacked and sustained internal bleeding in her brain and down her spine. It distresses Paul and his wife a great deal to know that her mother 'almost had a pauper's burial' which they could neither attend nor influence from here. When she travelled to the UK, Paul's wife left behind a younger sister in her early teens. They have no idea what may have happened to her since.

'We don't even know what the grave looks like or where it is'

Reflections

'I obviously miss my people, my family (and) my relatives' Paul says. This is particularly the case when it comes to holidays like Easter or Christmas when 'there's just us', asking 'where can you go? I don't know anybody.'

'It's really hard to switch off'

Life now

Paul has now lived in NI for 7 years and was more recently joined by his wife. Their young daughter was born here and they have since had another

child. Daily life now consists of getting up, having breakfast and then 'probably going out to meet people from one organisation or another to try to establish some networks.' Paul takes part in a weekly multicultural football game organised by a local church. Transport is provided and the gathering is an opportunity to meet people from all over the world, most of whom are also seeking asylum.

'Too much time'

Paul is a university graduate but, like all asylum seekers, is not permitted to work.Time hangs heavily and he would much prefer to work to support his family. Sometimes he visits the library to access the internet or maybe spends the afternoon taking his children to the nearby park. When the weather is cold, the family spend most of their time in the house.

'We don't go out in the evening'

The family have endured a number of unprovoked attacks on their home. 'People would throw drinks or maybe smash an egg against the window' as his small daughter was standing watching. On other occasions, people would kick the door and shout which was very frightening for the family. He says 'we never opened the door to challenge it because we thought it was too dangerous.' The family rang the police a couple of times but it was out of the question to provide the report and descriptions that the police requested.

'We used to sleep with our daughter in our arms because she was so terrified'

Community leaders, in particular, have been helpful since they do what they can to inform the community about asylum seekers and Paul comments that 'I found them much more helpful than the police.' The attacks have calmed down a bit with the help of local people but he remarks that 'we have learned to live with it.' In their experience, going out after five in the afternoon is not advisable since 'you might be in trouble' and this behaviour is 'just in us now, like a habit from where we lived before.'

'You can feel very isolated sitting in your house'

The family have joined a local church where they can attend services and 'meet some friendly people' some of whom may subsequently pay a visit. However, the connection - and welcome - offered in NI is not what they are used to and tends to be focused on practical things such as any urgent needs the family might have or bible chat rather than more personal exchanges. As Paul explains, 'my home experience is when you've got a visitor, it's very much (an emphasis on) welcome and wanting to know more about the visitor' rather than the reserve that he notices here.

'The welcome is much greater at home'

Paul has tried, on occasion, to tell some people about his story but has found that 'they don't want to hear' adding that 'some people get really angry.' He finds that 'people's attitudes are very much influenced by the tabloids (newspapers)' , fuelling the message that newcomers to NI are here to 'steal' jobs etc. and which contributes to an atmosphere of fear and suspicion towards 'outsiders'. 'It will take some time for people here to realise that not everyone who comes is here to compete for their jobs' he says. His experience is that most people, some 90%, are quite nice and it is just the minority, 10% who need to understand the reasons behind asylum.

Years on, the family still await an outcome for their asylum claim.

Message

Paul has a twofold message to the people of NI - a definite 'thank you for hosting us and accommodating us', but also to 'understand us before you start judging us (i.e. why we are here)'.

CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE: SHERRY'S STORY

Background

Sherry is someone who has faced a lot of problems in her life. She comes from a place where there remain some, non-religious, sections of society who still firmly believe in witchcraft i.e. that afflictions, ill-health and death are brought about, not by chance, but quite deliberately by ill-will on the part of other people. Those who support this superstition also believe in the power of witchcraft to counter whatever - or whoever - in their view has caused the suffering in the first place. Hers is by no means the only country where this is the case.

'When I wasn't a Christian, I did believe that'
Indeed, Sherry herself remembers a time when, before becoming a Christian, she would also have believed in similar forces herself. A professional person with a career ahead of her in a university setting, Sherry found herself the target of such forces and, in fear of her life, hurriedly left the country.

'It's a sad story'
When she first met the man who was to become her husband, she did not know his history of psychiatric illness or that he had required hospitalisation in the past. When this information finally came to light she was urged by both family and friends to leave him but could not do this. In the meantime, the couple had married and had five children together. They lived apart, as is often the case, in separate districts within the country, in order to support their family. There was no contact between Sherry's in-laws and the couple's children.

Some people 'don't believe that things can just happen'
Eventually, the psychiatric problem recurred and Sherry's husband disappeared. Because of their belief in witchcraft, his family of origin

thought Sherry herself was responsible and pursued her, issuing threats which, she believed, would result in her 'unlawful killing' and life became intolerable.

'they don't know where they (her children) are'
Due to the fact that the couple had, effectively, lived apart in order to support their family, Sherry's in-laws never knew the whereabouts of her children which gave them relative safety. Sherry was able to leave them in the care of cousins when she fled the country herself.

Sherry first arrived in the UK back in 2004. She had paid an agent the equivalent of £2000 to make the trip which involved a week-long boat journey followed by a flight. On arrival in the UK she was taken to family friends of the agent. At this point she did not know that it was possible for someone in her situation to claim asylum. These new contacts found her work through which she was able to support herself. The work involved childcare for a family with whom she was able to live and this sustained her until the point at which the family themselves left the UK and she came to the attention of UKBA as an 'illegal immigrant' i.e. here without permission.

She was assigned a solicitor who helped with the process of claiming asylum. However, for those like Sherry who, through no fault of their own, fail to claim asylum as soon as they arrive in the UK, the process is likely to become much more fraught.

'the day they arrested me, everything changed, my life completely changed'
As someone seeking asylum, like everyone else in this situation, Sherry is obliged to attend a police station to sign her name on a weekly basis. This is often a source of tension in itself since it is also the most likely time that the signer will be 'detained' i.e. arrested by the police. In 2008, since moving to NI, this happened to Sherry who spent over a year in detention at different centres in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland having been arrested for unexplained reasons.

'detention is like prison'
She recalls this period as being one that gave her 'most stress and depression because I didn't know what was going to happen.' At this time she also found that the way she was thinking also completely changed. Previously, she was not afraid to see police or immigration officials but found that this was no longer the case.

Reflections

'I miss my work, I miss my children, I miss my friends'
Sherry's oldest children are now grown-up themselves and her youngest child is now eight years old. The only means she has to keep in touch with her children is to talk on the 'phone although this is expensive. She has not seen her children for seven years and has not been able to contact her elderly mother.

'If I see my baby, will I know him?' will he know me? maybe through my voice'
Although she yearns for all that is familiar about her home country, Sherry is also frightened to return due to the threat against her which will not have abated with time. Besides more obvious things such as contact with her family and friends, Sherry misses other simple familiarities of culture such as national dishes that cannot be recreated here.

'to be living in another person's country is not easy'

Life now

'NI is a quiet place'
An English speaker all her life, Sherry found NI 'a quiet place' and life here 'very easy' until her arrest. On reflection, she realised that she liked the way people had treated her, supporting and rallying round her and says 'I like living in NI' (and) 'I appreciate what they did.'

At that time, the day started very early for Sherry, wakening at 4.30 - 5.00 every morning, with relief, thinking 'I thank God for me to see another day'.

She says 'my faith has always been very important to me, more than anything' and has helped her to keep going in the face of real hardship and danger.

Sherry discovered that the best means of coping with uncertainty was to keep as busy as possible. For this reason, she worked effectively full-time in a variety of voluntary roles, staffing reception, cleaning, waitressing and book-keeping for different charities.

'I want to keep busy all the time because my brain is not settled'
She says of herself 'if I stop, I'll be thinking nonsense.' In addition, she also took on a course of study with a local college to improve her chances of employment should she ever be permitted to work.

'I don't know what is going to happen. I am seriously worried'
Her application for asylum was initially refused and an order issued to deport her. However, this was appealed by her solicitor and there followed a nerve-wracking time awaiting the outcome of this final appeal. As she said, 'I would be afraid if I see police or immigration people' and when the letter arrived refusing her final appeal, Sherry disappeared.

'I'm not OK at all'

Message

Sherry is 48 years old. She has two messages that she would like to share.

(1) 'Whatever happens to you, rely on God'

(2) 'Be a good person to everybody and problems may come but they won't defeat you.

Thank You

We are indebted to those who made this publication possible by sharing their stories. Their dignity as persons and generosity of spirit shines through and has much to teach us.

Other publications from the 'Steps into Dialogue' project

Proposals by the Consultative Group on the Past – The Legacy Commission and Other Bodies

Proposals by the Consultative Group on the Past – Society Issues

Devolution of Policing and Criminal Justice to Northern Ireland – An Aid for Dialogue

St. Andrews Agreement

Agreement at Hillsborough Castle – An Aid to Discussion and Debate

Social Apartheid : Is This What We Really Want?

Programme for Cohesion Sharing and Integration: A Summary Document and Aid to Dialogue

From Past to Future: The Saville Inquiry and Beyond

The Peace Process is Over (?)