

Mobilising for Social Justice

MIGRANT RIGHTS CENTRE IRELAND'S
COMMUNITY WORK MODEL



MRCI
MIGRANT RIGHTS
CENTRE IRELAND

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of social change and effort to secure social justice is complex and challenging to communicate succinctly. I wish to acknowledge and thank sincerely Nuala Haughey, author of this publication for her trojan effort to do precisely this.

I also want to acknowledge the MRCI community workers and migrant activists who gave their time and without whom it would not have been possible to document and present our model of community work. Many people gave wonderful insights and comments on MRCI's work and it is very much appreciated and welcomed.

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Community work practice is neither ad hoc nor a by-product of other activities. MRCI would like to recognise the contribution of the Department of Applied Social Studies, NUI Maynooth in supporting our professional community work practice and along with others, like the Community Workers Cooperative for showing leadership in the area of quality standards for community work in Ireland. This is often invisible work but directly enhances the quality of our daily work and efforts to secure rights and justice for migrant workers and their families.

Siobhán O' Donoghue
Director MRCI

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'Blurred Boundaries' Migrant Domestic Workers Speak Through Art

Community Work Model

HERE WE SET OUT MRCI'S APPROACH TO A COMMUNITY WORK PRACTICE.

INTRODUCTION

The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland is a leading campaigning and advocacy organisation which seeks to advance the rights of migrant workers and their families in Ireland.

MRCI was set up in 2001 and is the first NGO working in the migration field in Ireland to systematically apply a community work model.

This case study aims to share with others why and how social justice goals can be achieved through action and analysis which is firmly rooted in community work practice.

Through our collective efforts, MRCI staff, activists and volunteers alike, have improved the lives of thousands of migrant workers and their families in Ireland.

We have advanced the rights of migrant workers against a backdrop of growing unemployment and deepening recession, when their concerns might be expected to attract hostility.

We work with men, women and young people who are culturally and ethnically diverse and whose situations, aspirations and ambitions are equally varied. Many have been victimised or exploited by criminals, employment agencies or unscrupulous employers. Some are residing in Ireland with an irregular status i.e. are undocumented. Many are facing barriers to achieving full equality.

What unites these individuals is their desire to work and live with dignity and respect. And what connects them to us is that we can help them fulfil this desire, for their betterment and the betterment of society as a whole.

By documenting here how we have achieved certain goals in the past decade, we hope to encourage others dedicated to improving the lives of marginalised people to see the benefits of using a community work approach.

We hope this case study of our work will be of particular interest to advocacy groups, trade unions and funders in Ireland and farther afield.

“We look at people as agents of their own destinies rather than objects of our own need and we try always to meet the hope in migrants’ eyes.”

Bobby Gilmore SCM,
MRCI Chairperson

Our Aim is to advance the rights of all migrant workers and their families.

Our Belief is that lives can be improved when individuals act collectively.

Our Vision is for an open and inclusive Ireland where migrant workers and their families participate fully and equally.

Our Focus is on promoting the empowerment and inclusion of migrants at risk of poverty, social exclusion, exploitation and discrimination.

Our Efforts are inspired by a community work approach which seeks to advance social justice goals by challenging the root causes of poverty, inequality and exclusion.

WHAT DOES MRCI DO?

We are primarily a campaigning and advocacy organisation.

We bring migrant workers together and equip them with the skills and knowledge to analyse the structural inequalities in Irish society which result in them being exploited or treated unequally.

Through this consciousness raising we strive to mobilise migrant workers to lobby and campaign for better, fairer policies which impact directly upon their daily lives.

These activities give migrant workers a chance to contribute to public discourse with purpose and dignity, staking their claim as equal members of society while contributing to MRCI's wider goal of an equal Ireland for all.

MIGRANT WORKERS ARE AT THE HEART OF ALL OUR ACTIVITIES, WHICH INCLUDE:

- Supporting the formation and development of migrant-led issue campaign groups and worker action groups to challenge exploitative work practices in three occupational sectors.
- Equipping these groups with confidence and analysis to successfully campaign and lobby for key reforms.
- Promoting leadership capacity among migrant workers through training workshops and formal and informal education opportunities.
- Offering free legal information and advocacy at our Drop-In Centre.
- Forging and maintaining key alliances with other NGOs, labour groups and representative bodies nationally and internationally.
- Engaging in constructive dialogue with key stakeholders such as employer bodies, state agencies and political representatives.

OUR ACHIEVEMENTS

We are a recognised authority on the rights of migrant workers, locally, nationally and internationally.

We have been persistent and outspoken in tackling tough issues and exposing inhumane aspects of Ireland's migrant labour regime.

WE COUNT AMONG OUR ACHIEVEMENTS:

- The introduction in 2009 of a temporary or "bridging" visa scheme to regularise the status of migrant workers who had become undocumented through no fault of their own.
- The reversal of changes in employment permit policy in 2009 that would have forced hundreds of migrant workers and their families who had made Ireland their home to either leave or to become undocumented.
- More than €2 million in legal awards for hundreds of exploited migrant workers who we helped to achieve settlements and judgments for back pay and other violations of their employment rights.
- The provision of quality information and referrals to more than 5,000 migrant workers and their families annually through our Drop-In Centre.
- The development and maintenance of a country-wide grassroots base of thousands of migrant worker activists which can be quickly mobilised to campaign on issues of concern.
- The delivery of the first accredited community development course targeting migrant workers in Ireland, in partnership with the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

(Other achievements are outlined later in this booklet.)

WE BELIEVE WE HAVE HAD SUCCESSFUL IMPACT BY:

- Supporting migrants directly affected by exploitation and structural inequalities to participate in advocacy and policy development, despite significant barriers.
- Profiling and building public and political awareness of migrant workers, including domestic workers, undocumented migrants and victims of forced labour and trafficking.
- Fostering strong alliances with a variety of civil society organisations, especially the trade union movement to advance the rights of migrant workers within mainstream union activities.
- We believe that our commitment to community work practice has been central to our success, enabling and empowering migrants directly affected by exploitation and unfair treatment to highlight the structural causes of their vulnerability and participate in bringing about policy changes.

“Community organisations and civil servants aren’t always the best of friends because they are coming at a problem from totally different angles. I never had that problem with MRCI.....they had a strong cooperative approach and were very open and you knew what they were doing. There were all kinds of issues and problems and areas of exploitation that we civil servants would never have found out about without MRCI. I found them reputable, solid and unsensational.”

Fergus McCafferty,
former Principle Officer and Head of Work Permits Section at
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (2002-2007)

“One of the keys to the success of MRCI is that it puts migrants themselves at the heart of the reflexions, design and implementation of its campaigns, with the MRCI staff and organisation acting more as some sort of facilitation tool for the structured expressions of their needs, hopes and campaigning objectives.

It’s a powerful model rooted in the realities faced by migrants and ethnic minorities in their daily lives: exclusion, discrimination, instability and precariousness. But it fosters also their willingness to contribute positively to societal debates from their perspective and to mainstream their concerns within the broader Irish social inclusion and democratic agenda.

MRCI’s campaigns have proven largely successful, proof that their approach works. A true success story to get inspiration from.”

Michael Privot,
Director ENAR – European Network Against Racism

WHAT IS COMMUNITY WORK PRACTICE?

Community work practice is a way of working with communities and groups to achieve positive social change, equality and inclusion.

It seeks to enable the active, visible and critical participation of previously excluded people in decision-making structures. This we believe is central to the achievement of long term sustainable change within society.

As an approach to achieving social change, community work practice is a recognised methodology which has its roots in powerful movements for change throughout the world. Our community work practice is informed by quality standards as outlined in 'Towards Standards for Quality Community Work: An All Ireland Statement of Values, Principles and Work Standards'

Our work is rooted in a form of community work practice developed in Ireland in the past half century, which is based on the core values of equality, anti-discrimination and social justice

It is built around a three-stage process based on the concepts of participation, empowerment and collective action for change.

PARTICIPATION

At its most basic, participation means getting people together.

MRCI actively creates opportunities and "spaces" for migrant workers to participate, both in the work of our organisation, as well as at a broader community or societal level.

We help and encourage migrant workers to meet and discuss issues which affect them.

Group activities at migrant worker gatherings are tailored by our community work staff to suit the cultural and practical interests of participants, as well as their needs and abilities.

We support the establishment of interest groups and action groups and the development of open and inclusive decision-making structures within those groups.

At the core of participation as a concept is the recognition that people have the right to have a say in decisions and structures which affect their lives.

EMPOWERMENT

From a community work perspective, empowerment is about helping people to progress from viewing problems purely at an individual level - often in terms of the exclusion and discrimination they themselves face - to a collective analysis and a collective commitment to change.

Migrant workers participating in campaigns and action groups are supported through a process of consciousness raising, or critical thinking, to situate the experiences of migrant workers in Ireland in the wider political, economic and social landscape.

Through workshops, training seminars and leadership programmes, we encourage and support migrant workers to ask questions and question answers. They learn their rights, explore how decisions affecting them are made, why systems operate as they do, and which factors keep barriers in place.

These group activities equip migrant activists to collectively identify and analyse problems affecting them and to devise ways to overcome these shared problems.

We call this process empowerment as it allows people to gain the knowledge and confidence to realise that they themselves have inherent power, and that this can be harnessed to bring about change.

When people thus empowered are able to link their “lived experiences” with an analysis of power and structural inequities, they are inspired to take more control of their lives. The impact in terms of momentum and focus on change can be powerful.

COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR CHANGE

MRCI’s collective actions focus mainly on campaigning on critical issues affecting migrant workers and their families. These are organised by our action groups and campaign groups, often in collaboration with trade unions and other NGOs.

The aim of all our campaigns is transformational change. We strive for outcomes which will improve the lives of groups, not just individuals. We also seek to challenge and change underlying thinking about issues, not just procedures and laws.

Our campaign work also involves intensive strategising, alliance building, political lobbying, policy analysis and public awareness raising through media engagement and migrant-led public action.

To instil confidence and ensure that migrants have the necessary practical skills to engage in campaign activities, we provide training in power dynamics, leadership and effective communications.

Our campaigns are the “output” of the preceding two stages of community work practice, participation and empowerment.



Community work practice often involves bringing people on a profound journey of personal development and political awakening.

While our work emboldens and empowers individuals, this is not its

primary aim.

Our constant focus remains firmly on the goal of working towards a more equal Ireland for all, including migrant workers and their families.

“Community work is about the struggle for human rights and justice. The emphasis is on the way in which society is organised to privilege or disadvantage individuals and groups depending on social status, ethnicity, gender and so on. When people who are oppressed begin to make the connections between their individual situation and the wider socio, political and economic context they become politicised. The attention shifts to the need for structural change and away from blaming individuals for their own situation.”

Siobhán O'Donoghue,
MRCI Director

“We know people can't go from participation to collective action overnight. We see the empowerment process as the really important bit in the middle from which people can emerge as activists. This is a really significant journey and it comes to fruition through campaigns and strong migrant leadership.”

Helen Lowry,
MRCI Community Work Coordinator

“The challenges we face as migrant workers can be indescribable. MRCI instils courage and involvement of migrant communities to face challenges without fear and even educates the wider Irish citizenry about our plight.”

Julius Fokasi,
migrant worker and MRCI board member

HOW DOES THE COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH INFORM OUR DAY-TO-DAY WORK?

We strive constantly to connect the problems faced by individual migrant workers to society's wider structural imbalances in a way that focuses on finding workable and just solutions.

We invest heavily in nurturing relationships based on mutual respect and trust with thousands of migrant workers and their families throughout the country.

We also help migrant worker groups to forge alliances with mainstream support structures such as trade unions, community development groups and NGOs.

Our strong grassroots base means we can efficiently gather convincing evidence upon which to base credible proposals for change.


Because we know what we are talking about, we strengthen our capacity to influence policy.

Because we have invested time in developing and maintaining strong relationships with and between migrant workers, we can quickly mobilise large numbers of activists for our campaigns.

Our thorough understanding of the dynamics of migration locally, nationally and globally allows us to present the case for better rights for migrant workers in Ireland in terms which are both humane and pragmatic.

We believe in empowerment and collective action rather than charity so ours is by definition a rights-based model.

A rights-based model turns “problems” for individuals which evoke case-by-case solutions into “issues” for all which require fundamental and lasting change.



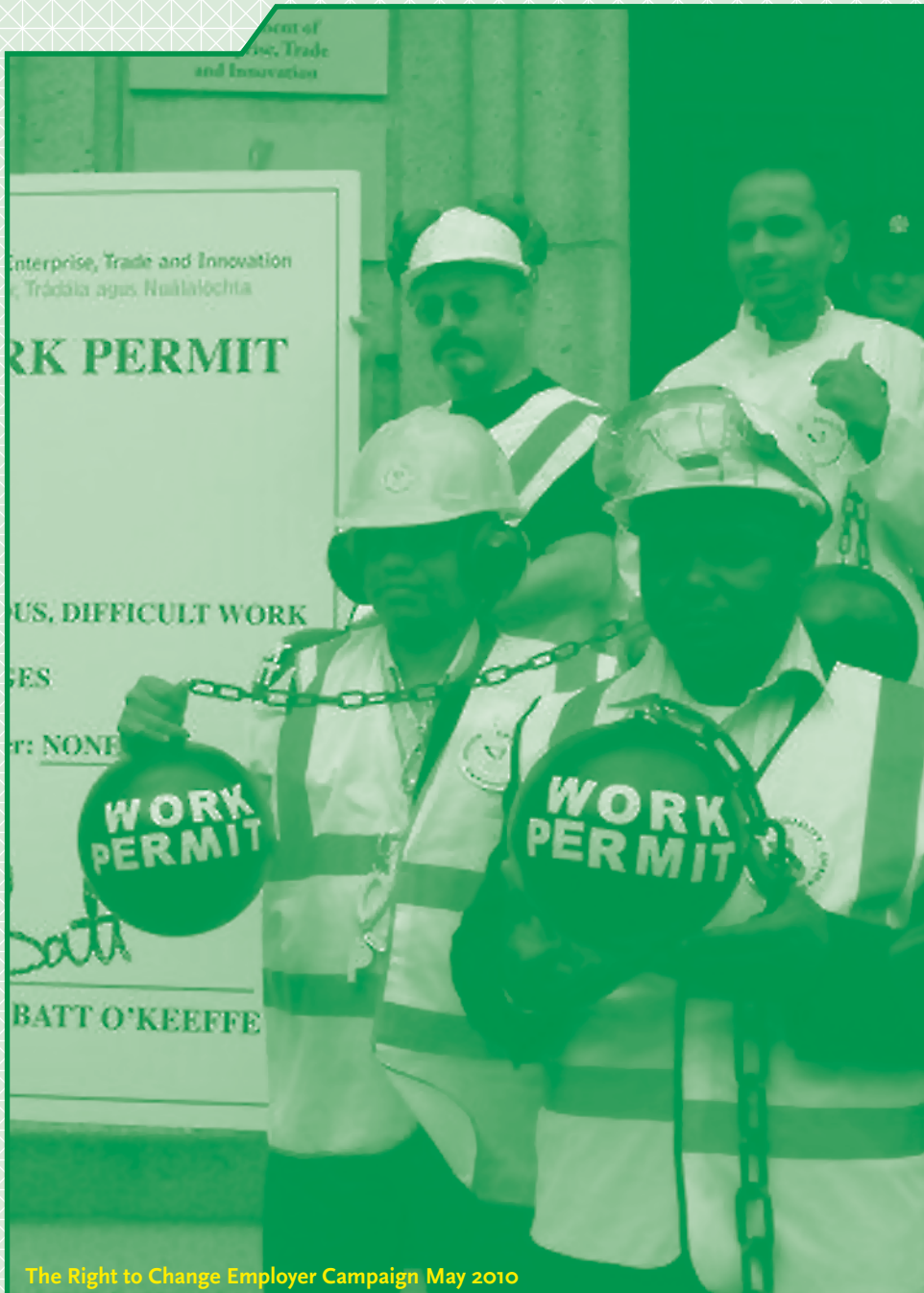
For example, our work with domestic workers and undocumented migrants seeks to gather and present evidence of their exploitation in ways that do not merely evoke sympathy, but which highlight the structural causes of their vulnerability.

“The way a problem is understood determines the solutions sought. Equally important is the approach used to achieve change. For MRCI this involves mobilisation, participation, empowerment, campaigning and advocacy but it is also more than the sum of these parts. The analysis that informs our work and the lens through which we see the world is shaped by a value system that is about equality and social justice.”

Siobhán O'Donoghue,
MRCI Director

“MRCI has done a very good job at organising representation of migrant workers at employment and equality tribunals and before rights commissioners, which is an important service in terms of enforcing standards. They recognise that it is really important to keep taking cases, not just one high profile case and expect the world to change without follow-up action.”

Michael Farrell,
Senior Solicitor Free Legal Advice Centre



Case Studies of MRCI's Community Work Approach to Mobilisation

HERE WE SET OUT SOME EXAMPLES OF MRCI PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES WHICH ILLUSTRATE THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH.

CASE STUDY: MIGRANTS' FORUM

Migrant workers looking for reliable information about their rights, or simply in search of friendship or support, are encouraged to attend our Migrants' Forum which meets at least four times a year.

We established the forum in 2003 to create a welcoming and informal collective "space" for migrant workers to get together.

Its aim is to encourage migrants who we encounter through our drop-in advice centre to move beyond their own individual concerns and experiences towards collective action.

To date, more than 2,000 migrant workers have participated in some 30 meetings of the forum, which are held outside of standard working hours to facilitate maximum attendance.

Participants in early forum sessions were encouraged to share their personal experiences of migrating to Ireland. We then moved on to consciousness raising and politicisation, inviting politicians as well as experts from trade unions, the private sector, government agencies and NGOs to share their knowledge and to receive feedback from our members.

A series of Know Your Rights information sessions focused on the Irish political system, employment and tenancy rights, social welfare entitlements and key immigration and labour-related policy developments.

Key decision makers and stakeholders are invited to attend the forum so they can interact with migrant workers on critical issues.

As well as providing accurate and up to date information, the forum allows us to identify collective concerns which ultimately feed into our policy positions and campaigns. It is also a direct route for migrants to get involved in campaigns for change.

The forum allows potential migrant leaders to naturally emerge, and we nurture this process by offering training in leadership, public speaking and lobbying.

Gradually, migrant workers have themselves taken ownership of the forum, participating more actively in its planning and organisation and taking on spokespersons roles.

The forum also has an important solidarity-building dimension, organising social events such as celebrations of campaign wins and an annual International Migrants' Day party.

Outside of forum meetings, individuals are encouraged to come to our Drop-In Centre for information and support about their personal situations.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Participants identify key concerns which feed into MRCI policy positions and campaigns.
- Forum meetings are a way of continually renewing and building MRCI's base and identifying new leaders who are encouraged to join workers' action groups and campaigns.
- Migrants engage with policy makers and other stakeholders in a non-intimidating setting.
- Local and national politicians engage with migrants and their families on a wide range of issues.

COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH

- The forum is a migrant-led “space” where workers at risk of discrimination, poverty and social exclusion can gather to participate.
- It empowers migrant workers through providing accurate and relevant information and encouraging critical thinking.
- It is a stepping stone to collective action for social change.

“When I first came to the forum I was giving up. At the forum I felt love, found information and support. Time was made for me.”

Migrants’ Forum member

“The government have no idea of how their changes and laws are impacting on migrant workers. The economic downturn is making it harder for migrants. At the forum we are here together, someone can listen to us. We can show the government that we exist.”

Migrants’ Forum member

CASE STUDY: DOMESTIC WORKERS ACTION GROUP

One of MRCI’s first initiatives was to foster the establishment of a support group for domestic workers whose work in private homes as live-in carers, child minders and housekeepers had contributed to them being exploited and isolated.

MRCI gradually nurtured the transformation of what was primarily a monthly social gathering into an action and campaign group which has successfully forged alliances to achieve key policy reforms. Peer support and solidarity remains an important feature of the group.

This evolution took several years of painstaking community work, the slow pace of progress reflecting the extent to which domestic workers are in vulnerable and isolated situations.

As community work practice emphasises the importance of “starting where people are at” and bringing them along with you, we initially did little more than host monthly get-togethers, providing workers with a secure and welcoming environment to allow them to get to know and trust each other, as well as us.

In order to move beyond participation to the empowerment stage, we introduced creative projects aimed at encouraging the women to collectively identify and critically examine the problems they faced in their workplaces.

Some 45 women designed and made a hand-stitched textile quilt with a series of panels highlighting the blurred boundaries between work and time off in their largely unregulated sector, where employers often expected them to be available around the clock.

The quilt, which took 12 months to complete, was displayed during a national exhibition and was part of a broader campaign for protections for domestic workers.

Today, the Domestic Workers Action Group – it changed its name from a support group to an action group in 2008 to reflect its campaigning remit – is at the forefront of the fight for the rights and dignity of workers employed in private homes throughout Ireland.

DWAG's 270 members, mostly women, have summoned the courage to highlight exploitative work practices on the streets and in the media. They have won high profile labour cases. They have lobbied politicians up and down the country. And they have forged key alliances with employer groups and trade unions, nationally and internationally.

Through our careful community work with domestic workers, these women are no longer invisible victims of an unfair regime. DWAG's loyal and active members are speaking out, presenting a strong critical analysis and making clear demands from politicians, policy makers and society at large.

As the history of DWAG shows, community work practice requires patience, commitment and a steady focus on the endgame.

"The DWAG supports women who often have very little power to take a stand and fight for rights not only for ourselves as individual women but for all employed as carers and in the private home. I am amazed at what we have managed to achieve over the past few years."

Hilda Regaspi,
DWAG Core Group member

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Campaigned, along with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, for the introduction in 2007 of a Code of Practice outlining domestic workers' rights and protections, as well as employers' obligations. The code sets out terms and conditions of employment in private homes, an important recognition that domestic workers have legally enforceable rights.
- Succeeded in convincing the National Employment Rights Authority to undertake inspections into employment conditions for workers in private homes.

COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH

- Participation is actively supported by overcoming barriers – for example, by holding meetings on Sundays which is commonly a day off for domestic workers and through using "soft" approaches to consciousness-raising, like the quilt project
- Much time is invested in empowering the women by linking their lived experiences with an analysis of power inequities which require structural changes. A powerful way to do this is through creative projects such as drama, art and film.
- Our community work efforts fostered the evolution of DWAG from a support group to a strident campaigning group.
- The focus on relationship building and sustainability shows how community work practice values process as much as outcomes; not only why we do things, but how we do things.

CASE STUDY: LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Successful collective action requires strong leadership. At MRCI we are continually seeking out and nurturing migrant leaders.

Over the years, we have organised workshops and residential sessions aimed at developing skills in areas such as communications, campaigning, lobbying and recruiting new members.

Migrants active in campaigns and action groups are supported to develop their leadership skills and analysis through participation in collective forums as well as more structured leadership programmes and sessions.

At the same time, we feel that as a national organisation concerned with equality we have a responsibility to create avenues for migrants themselves to become professional community workers.

So, in collaboration with the National University of Ireland at Maynooth, we devised and ran a nationally accredited community work course for 22 participants in 2009.

The participants included seven MRCI activists as well as other non-EU immigrants who were already involved with ethnic minority groups or community organisations around the country, either as employees or on a voluntary basis.

OUTCOMES

- The 22 holders of the Certificate in Community Work can progress to professional degree level studies.
- Three of the MRCI migrant activists who completed the course subsequently became members of our board.

- At least one participant gained employment in a social justice organisation.
- The Certificate in Community Work is being replicated across the country by other organisations.

COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH

- All our leadership development activities support the empowerment of migrant workers.
- The community work course was itself run on community work principles, with facilitated and participative learning incorporating workshops, field trips and residential sessions as opposed to the use of traditional lectures.

“Community work is labour intensive and requires a high level of skills, analysis and commitment. It cannot be done from behind a desk, it involves unsociable hours and can be difficult to define in terms of tangible outputs. Much of it is process orientated so it is really important to be focused and clear on end goal.”

Siobhán O'Donoghue,
MRCI Director

“Community work is a conscious practice and is defined by principles of participation, empowerment, collective action for social change, equality and social justice. A community worker is always conscious of moving from individual to collective issues. The community work course enabled us to understand this clearly and made us aware of the process in which we work towards addressing social justice issues.”

Meena Baskarasubramanian,
Community Work Course participant

CASE STUDY: CAMPAIGNS

Campaign work is our main vehicle for collective action for change. We usually have several campaigns active at any one time, with some in more intense phases than others. One of our shortest and most successful campaigns was established swiftly and in the midst of a major jobs crisis to block regressive government plans which we believed unfairly scapegoated migrant workers.

Other campaigns which seek more fundamental and lasting structural reform have been built up over longer periods.

Campaign activities include public and direct actions, lobbying politicians, i.e. letter writing and visits, presentations at parliamentary committees, meetings with policy makers and government ministers, public awareness and media work, building allies.

All our campaigns are developed in partnership with migrant workers and each one is managed by a core group of committed migrant activists working in collaboration with our community workers.

In keeping with our community work approach, our campaigns involve the “active and critical” participation of those affected by particular issues in every phase of the campaigns.

We are constantly identifying new issues of concern that future campaigns may coalesce around.

Here we give two examples of our ongoing campaigns.

CAMPAIGN FOR THE RIGHT TO CHANGE EMPLOYER

Ireland’s Work Permit system effectively binds workers to their employers. By offering migrant workers no way to freely change jobs, the system renders them completely dependent on their employer for their legal status.

This is a perfect environment for the exploitation of workers by unscrupulous employers, and MRCI has exposed several shocking cases where migrant workers were treated as little more than indentured servants.

This issue is one which affects many of our members, from waitresses and agricultural workers to nannies and carers. For many years, we raised our concerns about the Work Permit system with government officials and this led to some welcome administrative changes. We also lodged hundreds of formal cases under Irish labour and employment rights law for violation of permit workers’ rights.

Our community work ethos compels us to seek systematic structural reforms for the benefit of the roughly 25,000 work permit holders in Ireland, and not just solutions to individual problems.

So we brought together a working group of activists and migrant worker leaders who agreed to make this issue our headline campaign for 2010. The campaign kicked off with the publication of research we commissioned which showed a significant level of public support for our proposal to allow workers to freely change employers within their job category.

This has been a bold and dynamic campaign involving seasoned activists from other campaign core groups and action groups. Our activists have met ministers, addressed parliamentary committees and, along with trade union allies, collected thousands of signatures of support from people in the home constituencies of the relevant ministers. They have received the endorsement from employer and trade union

bodies for the campaign. Our members have explained the injustices of the current system in countless media interviews, held noisy demonstrations outside government offices and written thousands of letters to ministers and other parliamentarians. They have done significant outreach work around the country to build widespread support for the campaign and to identify regional migrant leaders.

While a change of government in early 2011 brought about a forced hiatus in this campaign, we are confident that in the near future we will bring home the changes our members seek.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The Oireachtas Committee on Employment recommended that a reasonable solution could be achieved if the then Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment government worked with MRCI to identify a way forward. Discussions between MRCI and the minister and government officials began in January 2011.

COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH

- This migrant-led campaign took off quickly because the ground-work of participation and empowerment had already been laid.
- We held training sessions and workshops for activists while the campaign was at its height, to give them the chance to put newly acquired skills and analysis into practice.
- The campaign allowed our most experienced activists to share their skills and experience with newer participants.

“Our campaign work has gotten much stronger over the years because those leaders and activists who have been with us a while continue to be part of campaigns. This means the tactics we can use have developed too and become more sophisticated and effective.”

Bill Abom,
MRCI Deputy Director

“The MRCI makes us feel we are not alone. I trust members of the group because they are more or less in the same situation. When you know your rights that knowledge makes you powerful. I have learned my rights and how to fight for the rights of others. It has brought us together and built our confidence to participate fully in the Irish society.”

Rajat Bhatnagar,
Migrant activist

CAMPAIGN FOR REGULARISATION OF UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS

In keeping with our community work commitment to always seek out the most marginalised groups for inclusion, in 2010 we began laying the ground for a campaign to seek redress for Ireland's estimated 30,000 undocumented migrants.

These include men, women and children who, for a whole variety of reasons, are living in Ireland without valid 'legal' permission. Most are economic migrants, attracted to Ireland during its recent economic boom to work in the black market or study. Others are children who were born here to parents who are undocumented. Many entered the country with 'legally' but became undocumented for many complex reasons.

Most have been in Ireland for several years working and paying taxes, and have settled within Irish communities. People who are undocumented live under tremendous stress and fear, are more vulnerable to exploitation and are excluded from basic services. Most are cut off from their families, their situations similar to the plight of the Irish undocumented in the United States of America.

The problem of undocumented migrants is a direct result of Ireland's failure to establish coherent immigration structures and policies. Ireland has the opportunity to provide a fair and responsible solution to this situation by introducing an Earned

Regularisation Scheme which would benefit undocumented migrants, their families and Irish society.

The Campaign for the Regularisation of Undocumented Workers builds on the success of our 2010 Bridging Visa Campaign, which allowed hundreds of undocumented migrant workers to become regularised.

In building this campaign, we have been acutely aware of the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of undocumented migrants. Fear of the authorities and lack of control over their lives impacts psychologically on these people, inhibiting their willingness to speak out. It also poses practical challenges.

We appreciate that some people have been too afraid to attend open public sessions, preferring to send friends on their behalf. To cater for this, we have tried to encourage participation through smaller induction meetings.

We also realise that undocumented people need much more support than other categories of migrants, and we are tailoring our initiatives to meet their needs. This is in keeping with the community work imperative to start “where people are” and bring them along with you.

As with all our campaigns, we have established a core group of activists which we hope to expand. Creative activities including film projects will be used to allow migrants to publically communicate very difficult issues while maintaining anonymity.

Much of the community work input on this campaign until early 2011 involved building migrant participation and empowerment, while also forging alliances within local communities and with key opinion formers and leaders.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The direct participation of and engagement with undocumented migrants has undermined the notion that this group is impossible to reach and work with in an organised and structured way.

COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH

- We have worked hard to identify migrant leaders to help us build the necessary trust to encourage and support vulnerable individuals to join the campaign.
- We encourage people to tell their own stories in ways that allow them to honour themselves but also links directly to the campaign message.
- We support people to show solidarity with each other irrespective of their status, circumstances nationality, ethnicity and so on.
- We encourage people to move beyond their individual situations and to see the value of collective action towards a solution that would benefit all undocumented migrants.

“MRCI would be on the first page when it comes to best practice in Europe in dealing with undocumented migrant workers, through their empowerment work with migrants, their strong links with trade unions and their good working relationships with government institutions. We are always directing people to MRCI, particularly because of the quality of their information and campaigning materials, as well as their mobilisation work.”

Michele Levoy, director of PICUM, the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, which promotes respect for the human rights of undocumented migrants in Europe

“When you are undocumented you are invisible. MRCI gives us more hope and stand for our rights.”

Nina, an undocumented migrant

WORKING WITH OTHERS

In keeping with our conviction that unity brings strength, we are always keen to build synergetic relationships with other groups working for social justice.

As MRCI focuses on migrant worker rights, we have made every effort to forge alliances with trade unions on areas of mutual concern at local, national and international levels.

This has enabled us to secure vital trade union endorsement for certain proposed policy changes for migrant workers, while other policy changes have been adopted as official union positions.

We work in solidarity with the broader community sector as an active member of the Community Platform, a network of 30 national organisations challenging poverty and inequality. We also work with the Community Workers' Co-Operative to promote good community work practice.

The extent of our participation with other groups allows us to embed migrant worker rights in mainstream structures, secure wide support for our advocacy and campaign efforts, and counter any potential efforts to pit marginalised groups against each other in times of deepening recession.

Our groundbreaking collaborative work with SIPTU (the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) to advance the rights of migrant workers in the mushroom industry is detailed in the case study below.

CASE STUDY: MUSHROOM WORKERS ACTION GROUP

At the height of Ireland's much-vaunted Celtic tiger era, hundreds of eastern European women worked in near slave-like conditions harvesting mushrooms in darkened tunnels in rural Ireland.

In 2006, reports began to trickle through to MRCI's Dublin headquarters about the exploitation of migrant workers on isolated mushroom farms. In a bid to escape repressive working and living conditions, individuals, and even entire groups of workers, began turning up at our offices with their belongings.

Their accounts were scandalous: workers being paid less than a third of the minimum rate of pay; workers labouring for more than 16 hours a day without written contracts, days off or overtime payments; workers becoming ill after exposure to toxic chemicals.

We began reaching out to these workers who were entirely cut off from support structures of any kind. Mostly women, few of them spoke English and all of them lived in physical isolation, often in properties owned by their employers on or near to the mushroom farms. All were fearful that if they complained about their working conditions they would lose their jobs.

We established a mushroom workers' support group, our staff travelling with interpreters to hold house meetings at migrants' homes on farms as well as producing a newsletter in the workers' main languages. English language workshops were offered, as well as training in Irish employment laws, anti-racism, equality issues and campaign skills. In 2007, the action group evolved into an independent representative organisation, the Agricultural Workers' Association, which reaches out to other agricultural workers beyond mushroom pickers.

These activities enabled greater integration of migrant workers and their issues in community-based, local and national decision-making bodies.

However, it was clear that these workers needed to formalise their relationships with trade unions in order to improve terms and conditions for all workers in the agricultural sector through existing industrial relations mechanisms.

We set about collaborating with the trade union, SIPTU, to achieve this end. Together we developed a Memorandum of Understanding to give formal recognition to the relationship between our two organisations.

This collaboration between MRCI and SIPTU came at a time when the union was shifting its own method of engagement with its members from the service model to a worker-organiser model which more closely mirrors elements of MRCI's community work practice.

As part of this shift, SIPTU recruited a former mushroom worker and MRCI activist as a full-time organiser for the mushroom farms in counties Cavan and Monaghan.

This individual skillfully brought mushroom workers together, developed migrant leadership and empowered workers to take action to ensure their workplace rights were respected. Conditions and pay for mushroom workers have improved dramatically and organising and leadership development work continues.

Building on the success of this pilot initiative, SIPTU and MRCI continue to campaign together with migrant workers in the restaurant, cleaning and red meat sectors.

Partnerships between community sector organisations and trade unions can be very powerful means of securing rights and building a voice. We hope to develop the model of good practice that has evolved between MRCI and SIPTU and share it with others also interested in similar collaborative work.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Some 1,300 mushroom workers participated in collective actions to directly challenge exploitation and conditions of employment.
- Workers now receive pay for hours worked, bank holiday pay, sick pay and Sunday work.
- Both organisations benefitted in terms of credibility and trust across the sectoral divide between the labour movement and the community and voluntary sector.

“Meeting with other members and hearing their stories makes you angry and you want to fight for their fair treatment as well. With the group we can’t be taken for fools any more. If I meet another mushroom worker I encourage them to join the group as well. If I didn’t join the group I couldn’t see how there would be any change on the farm.”

Basa, a mushroom worker

“Our collaboration with MRCI is carving out new and innovative ways of protecting and advancing the rights of all low waged workers.”

Jack O’ Connor,
General President SIPTU

COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH

- Mobilisation of a marginalised and isolated group of workers.
- A model of worker organisation was developed which addresses the key issues of language, leadership development and worker representation.
- Proven working methods were established for future collaborations between MRCI and other trade unions.

“MRCI is unique in that it identifies important sectoral groups within wider migrant worker communities, like mushroom pickers or domestic workers, and then links these with traditional support structures like trade unions. This relationship in turn gives MRCI’s campaigns added impact. I haven’t seen that anywhere else in Europe. In other countries, migrant organisations usually refer individuals to trade unions only to address individual cases of exploitation. MRCI’s community work approach is a process of true and sustainable empowerment of vulnerable workers to prevent future abuse.”

Jeroen Beirnaert,

Project Coordinator Forced Labour and Trafficking, International Trade Union Confederation.

“As a minister, one of the things that impressed me about MRCI was that migrant workers who were being exploited had a lot of confidence in them. A lot of these were people from countries where human rights were pretty well non-existent and would have been generally unwilling to come forward to the authorities. MRCI was a very useful buffer and managed to get information from such people where official Irish organisations would have found it very difficult. I would generally have considered MRCI’s evidence to be quite credible.”

Tony Killeen,

former Minister for Labour Affairs

FOCUS ON EQUALITY & DIVERSITY

Equality and social justice are central to our mission and our work. We recognise that multiple forms of discrimination exist and that securing “equality outcomes” requires action to address discrimination on the basis of social status, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, age and so on.

We strive to promote equality and address inequality at an internal organisational level as well as in our dealings with groups, individuals and organisations.

In an effort to maintain and strengthen our focus on equality and social justice our staff and migrant activist leaders have taken part in training on equality and diversity in society.

One example of this was an intense three day residential which allowed many to deepen their diversity awareness and enhanced their ability to create inclusive organisations.

The well regarded US-based Opening Doors Diversity Initiative allows participants to explore diversity through their own multiple group identities based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, social status, nationality, religion and sexuality.

It asks participants to explore how the prevailing “dominator” model of social organisation – whereby those on top dominate those below – plays out in their lives, their workplaces and their society.

COMMUNITY WORK APPROACH

- The Opening Doors Diversity Project chimes with MRCI’s community work approach which aims to tackle the unequal distribution of power in society, and to do so using a true partnership as in the “power with” approach.

- The “power with” working method requires our staff, activists and volunteers to recognise their own power as individuals and to use this power ethically in their professional interactions with migrant workers and others.

“Opening Doors is a good tool with which to develop analysis of power. As a campaigning organisation, we apply a power analysis to the problems migrant workers and their families face, why they occur, and how you go about changing them.”

Helen Lowry,
Community Work Coordinator, MRCI

“Opening Doors allowed me to understand the different dynamics surrounding discrimination, power and oppression. It allowed me to become aware of different identities and how through them we oscillate between the roles of oppressed and oppressor. In working with migrant workers who experience multiple forms of discrimination it has been very useful to develop such an understanding.”

Pablo Rojas Coppari,
Project Worker, MRCI

IN CONCLUSION

MRCI celebrates 10 years of community work activity in 2011. In this time we have worked tirelessly to advance the rights of migrant workers and their families.

As these case studies illustrate, community work practice is challenging, time-consuming and resource-intensive, but it is also immensely effective and rewarding.

We can point to positive changes in policy, law and access to rights for migrant workers and their families.

Our efforts have not only led to pro-forma policy reform, they have also won over hearts and minds, creating conditions for sustained progress towards more humane policies and practices.

One achievement which we are deeply proud of is the fact migrants – often the most vulnerable and invisible people in society because of their social and legal status – are now strong leaders and activists for a more equal Ireland.

We hope we have shown through the examples of our work that harnessing the power of migrant worker communities, in all their diversity and richness, can create political will for positive change.

We recognise that the community work model may not appeal to every organisation working with marginalised groups. We accept that it is only one of several professional methods available to organisations advocating for social justice goals. And we realise that it is not a panacea. But as passionate believers in what we do, we present this case study in the hope that it may strike a chord with others and be of some practical use.

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