

# WEAVING A NEW TARTAN IN SCOTLAND

THE ROLE OF ARTS AND CULTURE IN REFUGEE  
INTEGRATION

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*“We shouldn’t see Glasgow so much as a melting pot but as a place that has developed its own tartan: it’s got strands of many different colours running along beside each other and sometimes across each other, but together it makes a beautiful tartan.” (Doors Open, 2006)*

## **A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY**

The terms “asylum seeker” and “refugee” are used to refer to the different immigration status of two categories of migrant. Asylum seekers are those who have arrived in the UK and are waiting for the government to make a decision on their claim for asylum. They are not entitled to permanent housing or full welfare benefits, and do not have permission to work.

A refugee is someone who the Government of the new country decides to recognise under the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees as having:

*A well-founded fear of persecution for reason of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.*

Refugees have the same access to public services as other UK citizens.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first decade of the twenty first century has been bookended in Glasgow with the murder of one asylum seeker in 2001 and the apparent suicide of another asylum seeking family in 2010. While these events were tragic in themselves and undoubtedly held lessons for the city, they can not be regarded as telling the whole story of the refugee experience in Glasgow.

As a community worker with 24 years experience I have seen some changes in Glasgow. One of the most visible of these has been the mainly white working class city becoming the receiving community for around 18,000 asylum seekers in a period of less than 10 years. Glasgow has developed a range of innovative means, including arts and culture, to promote the integration of its new racially diverse communities. Community development has played a major role in supporting some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country and I am

going to describe two local projects that have been pivotal to the community integration process. First, a bit of background for the city, and UK asylum policy developments.

## **GLASGOW**

Glasgow is Scotland’s largest city, with a proud industrial and manufacturing past that was largely decimated by the end of the 1980s due to a mix of government policy, privatisation, and the economic climate. However, from the time of the industrial revolution many of its communities had experienced significant levels of poverty in overcrowded tenements with shared washing and toilet facilities. Most of the inner city tenements were demolished as part of a slum clearance programme starting in the 1950s to make way for huge new council estates on the outskirts of the city and by the 1960s for multi-storey “villages in the sky”. However, massive unemployment and a life of poverty continued to blight Glasgow’s peripheral public housing schemes—in the 1980s 44% of manufacturing jobs in the Clydeside economy disappeared (Mooney & Danson 1997). Poor health, low skills, deprivation and drug and alcohol abuse grew while the ability of the local authorities to provide adequate services was constrained by central government financial controls. There also grew a recognition that slum clearance may have improved people’s housing, but it didn’t resolve the other problems. One of the anti-poverty policy responses in the West of Scotland was the promotion of community development, both at a political and practice level.

## **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Prior to Scottish local government reorganisation in 1975 there had been a few examples in both Council and voluntary sectors of community development initiatives, but it took the creation of Strathclyde Regional Council, covering Greater Glasgow, the industrial towns of the Clyde Valley and a large rural area, and the emergence of its anti-deprivation strategy to establish

community work as a profession within Social Work.

Community development is a “transformative process” that involves “fostering consciousness and activism to achieve social justice” (Emejulu 2006). The role of community workers is to assist individuals and communities to identify issues, and to come together with others to organise around them, with regard to issues of power and exclusion. In the 1980s Strathclyde Regional Council did not want “a subservient and grateful” public—it wanted “strong collective organisation to press from below” for improvements (SRC 1983). Subsequent local government reorganisation and funding crises have weakened that kind of political support for community development. Now in Glasgow there exist only 17 local authority community workers for a population of over 500,000.

In Scotland in the 1970s there was also an emerging community arts movement with a growing interest in community development. Community development placed an emphasis on participatory neighbourhood work, developing local peoples’ skills and knowledge to enable them to collectively improve their lives. Working with people experiencing any kind of disadvantage, community development can give them back a sense of themselves—treat people as people, with dignity and humanity—not questioning their credibility. This influenced the thinking and practice of a range of professional workers, including some of those involved in community arts. The inclusion of artists in development work has encouraged creative ways of thinking and increased the potential for people to understand themselves and change how they see the world, as well as bolster community pride and identity.

### **ASYLUM SEEKER ARRIVAL: A HOUSING LED INITIATIVE**

Scotland has seen waves of immigration over the 20th century, from the Irish and the Jews, to the post-WWII Poles and Italians and since then, ripples of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi, Ugandan Asian,

Chinese and Vietnamese arrivals. Because of initially a lack of choice, and later, restrictions on access to public rented housing (e.g. allocations to housing are based on local connections to a region or time spent on the waiting list) these incoming communities gravitated towards private rented accommodation. In the public sector, peripheral housing schemes mentioned above and the inner city tower block estates like the Gorbals, the BME (black and minority ethnic) community was practically non-existent. Immigrants gravitated towards areas of the city like Woodlands and Garnethill where commercial and community facilities meeting their cultural needs began to develop in the 1960s. Still, Glasgow’s population at census time in 2001 was 94.6% white, with a very small, largely Pakistani, BME population.

With the building of the neighbouring New Towns like East Kilbride and Cumbernauld, many Glaswegians left the city in the 1960s with the lure of a better quality of life, and by the 1990s many others had joined Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s “property owning democracy” taking up the “Right to Buy” their council house, or had transferred to Housing Associations (independent voluntary organisations, often involving tenants in their management), which were becoming the primary vehicle of urban regeneration in Scotland. At the same time, by the 1990s there were 20,000 empty houses in the peripheral estates alone—a sure sign of population decline. (Mooney & Danson 1997).

Those local people remaining in council housing were likely to be those unable to move—people who were unemployed and on welfare benefits, in poor health, lone parents, older people. With a growth in poverty these areas became less desirable and the Council could not let (rent) the housing stock. Some small scale projects were developed to attract students and incoming professionals to the abandoned council accommodation in Glasgow, but this was not enough to reverse the tide of low demand. In 1999 Glasgow welcomed a small number of Kosovar refugees as part

of a UN resettlement project and this proved to be a successful development. So, when the Government introduced changes to its asylum support system, Glasgow City Council was in a position to take advantage.

“On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2000 Glasgow City Council entered into a 5 year contract with the Home Office for the procurement of 2,500 units of accommodation for asylum seekers dispersed by NASS (National Asylum Support Service) under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, pending determination of their claim by the Immigration Nationality Directorate” (Glasgow Housing Association 2004)

This was the Westminster “New Labour” Government’s “dispersal” plan in action—moving asylum seekers from the overpopulated, under pressure South East of England where most people enter the UK to seek asylum under the UN Refugee Convention to other areas whose local authorities signed accommodation contracts with the Home Office.

Why? To fill its hard to let, empty housing. To gain an income from that housing. According to Kelly (2002) Glasgow was the only city to volunteer for the dispersal programme. The 1999 Immigration & Asylum Act gave the Westminster government powers to determine where asylum seekers should be housed, so before it was pushed, Glasgow City Council negotiated the best contract it could.

By the end of 2001 around 8,000 asylum seekers were being housed in furnished accommodation in 22 neighbourhoods across Glasgow. This was a period that saw record breaking numbers of people seeking asylum in the UK—the figure peaked in 2002 at 84,130 applications—Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iran, China, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe being the major refugee producing countries.

There has been a range of community responses to dispersal over the last 10 years: negative responses, including racism and harassment, prompted in part by

the government representatives lack of consultation with and information for local people prior to the arrival of asylum seekers, and the vilification of refugees in the national tabloid media, often by our national politicians; positive responses, including setting up drop-in centres to provide humanitarian aid, and the development of Integration Networks which bring together a range of agencies to co-ordinate support services for people seeking asylum.

As the Labour government bought into the “fortress Europe” mentality, which pandered to the right wing press, there followed new, more draconian asylum legislation every other year. Through the introduction of new visa regimes and border controls the number of people reaching the UK to claim asylum dropped consistently until 2007. 2008 bucked that trend but in 2009 the number of applications was down again to 24,250 (UKBA 2010).

The large numbers of asylum claimants predictably slowed the decision-making system, and many people found themselves stuck in the limbo of the asylum system for 4 – 5 years or longer waiting for the Home Office to make a decision on their claims. Permission to take up paid employment was removed from asylum seekers in 2002, so families lived on minimum benefits (70% of Income Support levels), although their utility and housing bills were paid for several years.

The reaction of the local people in these “dispersal” neighbourhoods was predictably mixed when in 2000 the Government began to bus hundreds of African and Middle-Eastern asylum seeking families into these schemes.

Prior to the dispersal policy there were approximately 400 asylum claims made in the whole of Scotland each year. Since 2000 Glasgow alone has housed around 18,000 asylum seekers. On the latest evidence, over 80% of asylum cases in Scotland have been granted permission to stay and it is estimated that around 7,900 have elected to stay in Scotland.

## INTEGRATION

The Scottish Parliament was established in 1999 with significant “devolved” powers (e.g. health, education, justice) and this has helped Scotland develop its own voice on a range of matters. Although Immigration and Asylum have been kept as “reserved” matters under the control of the Westminster/UK government, MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) have been very critical of aspects of policy, for example, “dawn raids” by Immigration officers on the family homes of refused asylum seekers to arrest them prior to removal from the UK; the detention of children; the withdrawal of the right to work. Their work in partnership with major NGOs like Scottish Refugee Council, Save the Children and Amnesty International has seen a different landscape develop in Scotland that is much more supportive of asylum seekers and refugees than it appears to be south of the border. For example, in Scotland the view has been that integration should start from the day of arrival. Even if people receive a negative decision on their asylum claim and are removed, in the meantime they are entitled to services and to feel part of the community. The Westminster Government takes a different view in England—they do not like to support integration until people get their refugee status.

Key elements of integration—housing and safety, education and employment, health, family life, and a discrimination free environment—are all key elements in community development. Integration, like community development, is also a long term and multi-dimensional project. People generally want to live in an area where they feel welcome, and where there are opportunities to build a social network and to participate in community life. It is not just up to refugees to make adjustments to their lifestyles to “fit in”. The host society also has responsibilities to adapt to change, and to accept refugees as part of the national community.

Given the deprivation already existing in the dispersal neighbourhoods, there was a need to

involve and include all those facing social exclusion in a meaningful way. Community festivals were organised to share cultural traditions. Local Integration Networks supported local projects and facilities to benefit the whole community. After the murder of the asylum seeker, Firsat Daag, in 2001 the fear of racist violence in the city was palpable, but it ultimately led to meaningful communication between local residents and their new neighbours, and the realisation that they faced common problems in their housing conditions, poverty and lack of community safety.

Securing local commitment to involvement and change was crucial. In 2002 the Scottish Refugee Council and Glasgow City Council pioneered a Framework for Dialogue project, which involved community workers consulting both host communities and asylum seeking communities, and setting up local groups of asylum seekers that linked in to public services (the police, health services, libraries etc), provided information about the asylum system (e.g. people’s legal rights, support levels) etc. It enabled asylum seekers to develop social bonds within the refugee communities, build social bridges with Scottish neighbours, and social links with Scottish institutions like the local council and Scottish parliament. It created a space for dialogue around issues of power, difference and justice.

Through the Framework for Dialogue there were resources available to provide information, training and finance to enable activists to maximise their contribution to community life. Barriers to participation were removed, for example, childcare made it possible for asylum and refugee families to participate in events, interpreters made it possible for those who were not yet communicating in English to express their views, and accessible venues for events and meetings in premises in local communities were provided. These FFD groups still maintain a vital link between asylum seeking and refugee communities and service providers and political structures today.

## ARTS AND CULTURE

It has been said that “the greatest distance between peoples is not space, but culture”. (Gaffikin & Morrissey 1999)

One of the main areas of successful refugee integration in Glasgow has been developed through the arts, bringing people together to share and demonstrate their talents.

When people have fled an oppressive regime the importance of enabling them to rediscover freedom of expression should not be underestimated. It is also important not to underestimate the degree to which Immigration Services can take away their feelings of empowerment. While people are seeking asylum, government agencies control peoples’ lives: they control where you live, where you can travel, your income, your right to education; you can be detained at any time without trial, and you must report to the authorities when you are told. Asylum seekers need channels to express themselves. The arts plays a vital role here, offering non-verbal forms of expression—music or the visual arts are both means to express your own culture to others, and to participate in a shared experience with people who may speak different languages—in Glasgow it is estimated that there are over 40 different languages spoken! It is important for people who experience so much powerlessness in their lives to be able to express their feelings and importantly, to be able to speak for themselves, to be able to tell their stories.

Arts activities can also become a gateway to other organisations and opportunities, as the tale of the Village Storytelling Centre will illustrate.

*Now I am secretary of the local Integration Network and volunteer with the elderly day care centre*

—(Algerian refugee)

They can address concerns of the host communities and raise awareness of refugee issues —help people understand the facts, not the tabloid myths.

*My views were like the views of most low income people, believing the stories from the papers, thinking it looked as if they got more than they got. I didn’t realise what they had come through and how they could be an asset to the community.*

—(Scottish volunteer)

The arts can enable people to develop a sense of worth and identity that transfers into other areas of individuals’ lives.

*I had to leave my country where I’d lived for so many years, a country where to have a normal life you had to wear different masks all the time. If you did not, you would have unexpected problems (as well as the usual expected ones) every day.*

*It is quite obvious that when you lose your face, you lose your identity; and a person with no identity is no-one. I tried to keep my own face, my own heart, my own thoughts – in a word, my identity. And that’s why I’m here.*

—(Iranian refugee)

Minority voices can experience a lack of access to the mainstream media and alternative cultural voices are rarely heard there. For many communities, however, the Internet gives a chance to open up new windows on the world. Groups are learning to use arts and culture to resist the agendas set by dominant interests within society. The arts can reclaim and reassert alternative histories and cultures that reflect the experience of disenfranchised people and create “safe” space around potentially controversial issues. They can be catalysts that illuminate an issue in a way that can lead to action:

*I’m also involved in anti-deportation activity with friends from the play*

—(Scottish volunteer)

Art can be about celebrating cultural traditions or, like community development, it can provide a space

(a stage, a page) for the community to reflect on issues or concerns.

*It was interesting finding out how hard it is for asylum seekers moving to Britain*

—(Scottish volunteer)

It can be about collective representation. It can also develop individual skills: writing poetry or learning lines strengthens literacy and language skills and self confidence at once.

*One woman...who doesn't read or write is now active in all kinds of community work*

—(Scottish project worker)

If part of the community development process is the transfer of ideas and achieving change, then arts and culture are valuable tools to shape and present images to a broader audience. They can bridge or link audiences across economic/class and racial lines, and take people beyond their comfort zones.

*To think, at first, even sharing a bottle of water [with an asylum seeker] was strange. Maybe I'm not as racist as I thought*

—(Scottish volunteer)

To illustrate theory in practice outlined below are just two of many projects in Glasgow that provide positive examples of the outcomes that can be achieved when using arts and culture in community development. They are both small community based organisations that have managed to develop a variety of relationships, capacities and activities in unusually effective ways.

### **THE VILLAGE STORYTELLING PROJECT**

*Volunteers and participants within the Village Storytelling Centre demonstrated significant growth in self-confidence and self-awareness as well as understanding and the capacity to challenge racism and sectarianism*

—(HMI Inspectorate of Education)

Pollok is a public rented sector (council) peripheral

housing estate in the south side of Glasgow—built to tackle slum clearance and a severe housing shortage. In the 1990s, in a local Pollok church, the Village Project developed reminiscence work with older people and drama classes for local schoolchildren. In 2003 the project had begun to make connections with local asylum seekers through their regular ceilidhs, but this led to some of the project volunteers expressing negative views about refugees. Should the project confront people about their attitudes or work on building relationships and enabling people to get to know each other? The project chose the latter and began a project to gather traditional stories from as many as possible of the different nationalities of folk who had come to live in Pollok. A book called *Buffalo Horns: Stories from Around the World* (2004) was produced. The group developed one of the stories into a short drama, which they performed at the launch event of the book. A second book, *Village Stories* (2005), followed, the creative writing group by now encompassing several local Scottish residents as well. The group's dramatic pinnacle was a production of a play called "The Flats," which draws on both Glaswegian and refugee women's experience of seeking refuge from a persecution of sorts and how it brings two women together in friendship. Cast members spoke to the script-writer about their problems and their lives and say "every part of the script is real—everything in it is true."

From creative writing and drama, the Village branched out with a dance group and a choir, performing during Refugee Week and at an event to commemorate the end of the transatlantic slave trade. The Village has also developed a book project called *Doors Open* (2006) which brings adult refugees together with young Scottish people, and young refugees together with older Scottish people, to find out and compare their different experiences of migration, whether from one part of the city to the other from slums to the new housing of the 1930s, or from one side of the world to the other, seeking sanctuary.

The Village Project co-ordinator at the time, Rachel Smillie, believes the work they have done over the years has changed attitudes—as people become better informed about the asylum process, and as they made friends with refugee neighbours, their views are changing, and some have become articulate defenders of people facing detention or removal.

During the past 5 years while people have languished in the heavily criticized and now discredited asylum system, they were under heavy pressure to be seen to be “integrating” so many got involved in every opportunity that came their way. Like a *ceilidh*—dancing, singing, creative writing—it was all a break, a release, a chance to get away from all their worries and fears. Now as people gain leave to remain, they have lives to be getting on with. They have jobs to seek and bills to pay. But they are also using the confidence and skills developed at the Village to set up their own organisations to support new arrivals to the area. For example, a women’s group and a drop-in café. That’s a sure sign of success. One Algerian woman active in the Village says: “I found this community. You can make power for yourself, you don’t need someone else to give you power. You can do something to change your situation.”

### **MARYHILL INTEGRATION NETWORK**

Maryhill Integration Network (MIN) was one of ten partnerships between voluntary, statutory and community organisations that local people set up in Glasgow to coordinate services for asylum seekers and to promote opportunities for integration. Maryhill is in North West Glasgow and is a mixed community of owner occupation and social rented housing (council and Housing Association). The asylum seeker population is housed mainly in multi storey flats situated along the Maryhill corridor.

In its early years of development the Network provided a series of outings, parties and events to try to bring the different communities together. MIN established drop in centres in local churches to provide humanitarian aid, language classes, access to

advice and information and opportunities for asylum seekers and local residents to meet. They also began producing a quarterly newsletter that aimed to quash the many myths that were circulating about how “swamped” the country was becoming by asylum seekers, and to promote positive images, highlighting individual human stories.

In 2004 the Network was able to employ its own member of staff, Remzije Sherifi, herself a Kosovan refugee, and this enabled the creation of an arts and culture programme that has brought great recognition to the Network. The annual programme links International Women’s Day, Refugee Week, Black History Month and the festive period / Eid—all opportunities to raise awareness of the variety of skills and cultures that exist now in Glasgow. Groups spend weeks preparing a dance, a fashion show, a banner or whatever to be launched at one of those key times. It links MIN intrinsically to wider city and national celebrations and, says Remzije: “It’s the best way to bring people together”.

The Network has established a music club, developing the skills of both musicians and dancers. MIN is famous for its dance group, which performs all over Glasgow, and beyond. 2008 saw the launch of “Songs of Home, Songs of Hope”—a performance involving professional dance artists and musicians, along with an international cast, including asylum seekers and refugees, who find a shared language through songs and dance, exploring the joys and sorrows of a restricted life in exile.

In 2007 the Network produced two pieces of dance/theatre. “To Glasgow... with Love” told of people’s experiences of arriving in Glasgow and was performed after many weeks of rehearsal—“not always the easiest thing to do when key cast members disappear having been detained following dawn raids, or are at emergency meetings with lawyers” noted the director. The second piece was “Mother May I?”, which tells and relives childhood memories of adults and children from Glasgow, and countries



from which asylum seekers and refugees have fled, in a playful, but moving, piece of dance theatre. The choreographer maintains that “dance gives people a way to express themselves non-verbally, so even if they have language restrictions, it won’t hold them back.”

## **CONCLUSION**

If community development is about enabling people to achieve social change, then using the arts as a tool adds a new thread, a new strand, to help people understand, demonstrate and visualise what that change might mean, and to communicate this to others. Music, dance and theatre have enabled people to cross barriers of ignorance and prejudice. “By performing together they have come to know each other better, dispelling the stereotypes and negative attitudes regarding class, status and colour that were prevalent both in the receiving community and between asylum seekers themselves” observed Liam Stewart from the Village Project.

Like community development, the arts can be as much about the process of involving people in producing the work as the finished product itself. In the examples above, this has enabled people to feel a sense of belonging, and of ownership. While asylum seekers are unable to work, the arts can provide an outlet to help them explore their and others’ communities, engage with other people, help themselves and feel they are contributing something to the wider community. Crucially, community development can contribute to an analysis of power, revealing how structures of oppression in distant countries can reach out into local communities and impact on personal lives. By becoming involved in community development, people can gain insights into how power then works at a local level around refugee integration. It is hard to separate notions of power from poverty, and not just material poverty—poverty of rights. “Asylum seekers may feel more empowered in a group because they have nothing on their own” (Mills 2007): they are amongst the most

disadvantaged people in British society.

Involvement in arts and cultural activity alone cannot solve all the problems facing people in the asylum system in Glasgow but there is strong evidence that it helps improve their self-esteem and state of mind, and their relationships with their Scottish neighbours. If arts projects can be embedded in integration activity they can play a pivotal role in creating inclusive communities.

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