

International Dialogue on Migration: Migrant's Voice panel "Seeing the SDGs through the eyes of those left behind"

Egide Dhala

My name is Egide Dhala. I was born, educated for most of my life in DR Congo and migrated to Ireland in 1998. In DR Congo, I worked as a Lecturer in the Catholic University and as secretary to the Cardinal. Leaving a country where I enjoyed high social consideration was not easy but circumstances at that time pushed me to what I was far to believe was a new start with many challenges.

My first challenge was about my Identity. The first question I was asked by people from my community was if "I have already thrown out my body". Trying to understand what it meant, I was told that anyone who seeks asylum throws out his/her body! This apparently mere statement was actually full of meanings. I discovered later on that throwing out the body was about changing own identity, re-writing the story of life. I was told that this could start from changing personal name, age, nationality, story that brought you to country of destination, your family composition, your education and professional background... Did I throw out my body? No, I rather made the choice of facing my new life and social environment by still being myself.

Physical security in Ireland was the most enjoyable part of my new life but on the other hand the uncertainty on whether or not I will be accepted to remain in Ireland made it difficult for me to plan for my future. And not only that, I started losing hope thinking that I will not be able to still be myself, that I will not be able to speak English up to the level that will allow me to continue with my employment career or be in a job that reflects my level of education. The social environment was another challenge. While I felt very welcomed by few people from the Irish community that I met in the church or even just on the street greeting me with kindness and politeness, the media and the majority of people in the local community at that time looked at us as invading strangers that should leave the country. I was even threatened physically in my home, breaking my windows in the middle of the night and throwing hatred mails under my door, insulting me that I was a monkey that should return to the jungle. But where should I go? Going back to my country at that time was certainly not the option since it was not safe.

Negotiating a new life in my host country was not straightforward. Apart from the loss of confidence and self-esteem that I experienced, I could not even dream of being in a suitable employment. The set of capitals I had started to sink in a dead sea. Again people from my community told me that we should be realistic here, that the only jobs available to us were cleaning job, kitchen porter or any job of the same kind. I looked around me and noted that the majority of people in my situation, regardless of their education or professional background, were either unemployed or doing actually the type of jobs I have mentioned above. I then started to understand what is it to be a 'Migrant', specifically an asylum seeker or refugee. Migrant students or those who came with a work permit straight into jobs were completely a different picture, and indeed, not very visible in the community and social life.

I had to live! I thought I was any better than my people, so I applied for all these jobs too. I worked as a kitchen porter, a cleaner, general operator while thinking of how to change the situation for the better, not only for me but for people in my situation too. I believed that there should be continuity in life, that migration should not affect negatively people's lives but rather add value to the individual

who has taken the courage of searching for a secured life. *“One who saves own life can save many lives”*. This explained my commitment of working with migrants and for migrant’s empowerment.

To save others, I had to save myself first! I decided to deconstruct all the community (my community) discourse on migrant’s situation. I strongly believed that we all had valuable capitals that we could use in the host country that would benefit ourselves and people around us. Breaking the ice was the first thing to do. Naturally I am a very sociable person, and I thought I should use this asset to familiarise myself with my new social environment. I joined local community groups where I was able to make friends and connections. I helped them to understand migrants, that they are people and educated people, probably a chance and not a threat to the community. I still had very limited English at that time but I started improving my communication through regular interaction with Irish people.

My educational journey in host country contributed a lot into my personal development and integration and at the same time enabled me to explore ways of supporting migrants, especially asylum seekers and refugees’ education and empowerment. I was committed to find a job in this field and I did. Every day I visited individual asylum seekers in reception and accommodation centres throughout the country to give information and support on their asylum journey, life in Ireland, opportunities and challenges, available services, community life, in order to minimise risks of making not well informed decision or taking inappropriate direction about their future. I initiated and implemented several integration programmes for refugees, including language and cultural orientation training, computer literacy, arts, mentoring, employment access. I also thought that the general public needed to be educated and prepared to live with people from different countries and cultures. Not only I trained a range of service providers working directly with migrants, but I also initiated a public awareness program in schools that was delivered by well-trained migrants.

In my migration journey I have seen and learned a lot about who is a migrant. I know you all know this, but let me recall it again because migrant’s status determine their social stands and there are many that are forgotten and are always exposed to poverty and poor health. Regular visa students and migrant workers with valid work permit are often exempted by the integration challenge since they somehow consider their stay in host country as temporary and are supposed to have sufficient income to support their living conditions. Socially, apart from their close networks within student unions or universities, work mates, etc. they have less interactions with the general public and their local communities. However for some, this status may become insecure. In my current job I regularly meet former holders of student visa who have spent 4, 5 years or more as students before seeking asylum since the possibility of getting a work permit is quite restricted or limited for them. I always read desperation and sense of loss in them. Most are not equipped nor prepared to face a journey that shift their lives into uncertainty as returning to an unsafe country of origin is often not the preferred option. Refugees and other migrants with asylum seeking background are often faced with the challenge of integration (See notes from my colleague Salome). Undocumented migrants, though not visible in the community, they are exposed to very insecure life and extreme poverty, homelessness, etc.

The insecurity and vulnerability experienced by migrants due to their status often impact on their ability to negotiate their future in host country if not well supported. However, I also noted that for some migrants it was still difficult to adjust and enjoy life in host country due to different reasons: old age, low education background, strong native culture, deep trauma, etc. Many of those live only

physically in host country, they are scattered and would have preferred to live in their own country if possible. Women are the most vulnerable group among those. And this is what inspired me in thinking of setting up a support Organisation or program that would promote women's empowerment in country of origin instead of having to migrate. My Colleague Salome was the ever best person to discuss this matter with given her experience of working with migrant women. When I discussed this idea with her, she had been already planning to extent her experience of empowering women in Africa and together we thought we could build a good team in involving the all African diaspora. In 2010 we set up Wezesha (Swahili word for 'Empower') as an African Diaspora-led development organisation that aims to support women and children affected or likely to be affected by war, violence and poverty, especially in the African continent. We believed that we gained much capitals and resources that we could utilise to support both the eradication of violence against women and poverty alleviation in Africa.

Let me now tell you quickly about this Organisation and what we have been doing both in Ireland and in Africa (See Power point presentation)