

WORKING AMONG ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND REFUGEES - THE EMIGRANTS' COMMISSION'S EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

In this paper, I focus on the specific areas which form the basis of the Emigrants' Commission's day-to-day work dealings with asylum seekers and refugees.

The purpose of this contribution is twofold. First of all, I aim to give an overview of the existing relationships and work practices (including some current problems) for which we continuously struggle to make every effort to be of best service to the asylum seekers and the refugees. Secondly, I aim to propose possible ways to develop these relationships by considering the measures needed to improve and strengthen the existing relationships between the interested stakeholders (local and foreign, including the European Commission in particular) and the Emigrants' Commission.

In particular, I seek to deal with the question of State and European Commission support for our activities, and look at improved methods of dialogue and consultation. I also feel obliged to address the question of EU funding for our NGO-managed activities. We at the Commission believe in the provision of a more coherent Commission-wide framework for co-operation.

At the same time, we at the Commission are hopeful that these proposals provide a useful input and give new impetus to the ongoing process of internal and external appraisal of the way in which we should all function and relate to one another. It is understood that specific proposals must be established as a coherent part of the process of the overall reforms and necessary legislation.

The realisation of these goals would strengthen the Emigrants' Commission's *raison d'être* and position to see to the needs of the people who seek its help - particularly to the growing needs of protection and assistance to asylum seekers and refugees.

Background

The Emigrants' Commission - which is strictly the NGO founded and directed by the local Church Authorities - has for a long number of years been concerned and involved in the protection of asylum seekers and refugees. Until the introduction of the Refugees' Law in 2002, it used to give a significant contribution in the UNHCR's programme of work-related activities.

Nowadays, the Emigrants' Commission focuses mostly on the provision of protection and assistance to all those people who 'pass out' of the Detention Centres. It is presently providing shelter to about three hundred and fifty people; this totals to an approximate 44% of all those who are in the Open Centres. Involved in the day-to-day management of this activity, the Emigrants' Commission has a complement of nineteen service providers: including volunteers and full-time paid personnel.

A typical proof of the Emigrants' Commission's commitment to this cause is last year's water and electricity consumption bill which totalled Lm5,000 (approximately of 12,000 euros) - which it dutifully paid. Another recurrent expenditure includes our telephone bill which, in 2004, spiralled to Lm1, 200 (2,800 euros).

The following highlights some typical examples of the range of work we get involved in:

- We nurture contacts with personnel who have the potential to offer work opportunities while we do our utmost to secure full-time jobs for our clients;
- We have a small complement of medical practitioners who see to our clients' needs on a regular basis, both at our headquarters in Valletta as well as the Balzan Residential Complex;
- We provide free milk and nappies to all babies; this service taxes us more than Lm100 per month; simultaneously, we see to the children's needs in schools. At the beginning of this current scholastic year, we spent Lm500 to provide the children with their initial school needs;
- We offer assistance to trace documents and other relevant information that shed light on the true identity or kinship of our clients;
- We provide legal assistance when we are involved in cases that are not directly related to the asylum process of documentation.
- We process applications and help in the provision of the necessary documents for travelling purposes. In 2004, we offered assistance to a total of eight hundred and thirty-three people; their requirements varied from the processing of fresh applications to renewals and re-issues;
- We seek to foster and maintain a healthy rapport with all relevant authorities/stakeholders to be able to nurture a political social climate that is conducive to the best interests of our clients in all circumstances.

Furthermore, we embarked on an ambitious project at Balzan Residential Complex. Thanks to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who are the owners of these premises, we reached legal agreement to carry out the necessary structural alterations to change what had been an uninhabited convent for a long number of years into decent living unit quarters that

accommodate married couples with their families as well as male and female single persons (a total of 210 residents). The realisation of this ambitious project which is now in its final stage of completion has been, not only terribly taxing in currency, but, equally so, in the supervision of work.

At this complex, we make every effort to nurture the concept of building *a community of communities*. Every effort is made to transmit to our friends intrinsic values that have to respect diversity in all its potential forms, be it gender and sexual orientation, racial or ethnic, religion or belief, age, disability, education, etc. While we keep a watchful eye with tender love but, nonetheless, with assuring co-responsibility, we empower those we help to stand on their own two feet, become independent, possibly self-sufficient, and, above all, responsible for their own deeds. As expected, they are responsible for the upkeep of the premises, for the cooking of their food, etc.

Still, we are striving even harder for further development, as there is room for improvement. With the availability of additional human and material resource provision, we aim to engage all our friends into different training programmes that would hook them on to inspiring value-added life fulfilments.

Presently, we are also considering the organisation of an ethnic festival at Balzan Residential Complex. The general aims behind this activity include: the fostering of positive attitudes towards the relationships and well-being of our nationals and the asylum seekers; and the awareness, appreciation, and promotion of cultural and ethnic heritage. This is intended to be celebrated on June 20th, which is precisely the day dedicated to the immigrants. We are hopeful that we will receive adequate support to help us in the realisation of this socially educational project. As a matter of fact, we hope that this will not be a one-off activity. We envisage the need for more varied opportunities.

In fact, we are precisely going for this task as we have the true perception that a good number of our nationals are apprehensive of the presence of these people in our country. It is a fact that we meet people from all walks of life and of all ages who express fear and pass discriminatory remarks on grounds of colour, belief, employment and education in particular. This activity should thereby help us to inculcate respect for diversity and proof, to one and all, that such fears are unfounded - freaks of our intolerance and pitiful imagination!

Although the above is intended to give a quick snapshot of our main spread of work-related activities (*practically, from the moment they leave the Reception Centre onwards*), we would like to emphasise that our interests in the well-being of our clients go beyond the span of time they spend under our care and guidance. In fact, our concern prompts us to forward suggestions for the holistic betterment of the whole process; from day one when, for a multitude of complex factors, they find themselves on our shores until they are helped to settle, possibly with a long term solution, tailored to their specific needs.

The Way Forward

- Reception time

Our direct contacts with the people in *detention* (when we witness first hand what our would-be clients endure during this phase) compel us to state openly that *radical changes need to take place with immediate effect*.

First and foremost, it is a question of referring to this first stop as a Reception Centre and *not* as a Detention Centre. The word *detention* denotes negative messages that are painful to the asylum seeker and harmful and fearful to our population at large. There is a lot of weighting to this suggestion; the Authorities should be responsible to see to the change with immediate effect. If possible, the necessary course of action should be taken to ensure that the right message is communicated to all stakeholders, including the media and the people in the different communities of our country.

It is not enough that people at the Reception Centres are provided with basic shelter and food; the ambience and living standards (in the “accommodation” provided) badly need to be improved or changed.

The Emigrants’ Commission acknowledges that some time spent in the Reception Centre is inevitable; during this time, it is vital to ensure that each asylum seeker’s state of health and identity is by no measure a threat to the national well being and security of each and every one of us in our country. However, once the necessary precautions are taken to establish this safety, we see no reason why people who are seeking asylum/refuge should be kept further in the Reception Centre. So much so, that we believe the time spent there should never be made to exceed a three-month span. We go so far as to state, with all responsibility, that such time should be the longest span during which a person is kept against his/her wishes in *detention*, or better still *under controlled custody*.

Every effort should also be made to ensure that the time spent during the reception phase is decently and well spent. Other than the provision of humanly decent living conditions (reference to which has already been made), these people should be engaged in meaningful activities. Different programmes that cater for the holistic development of one’s physical, mental, social and emotional well-being should be put in place. At the same time, there should be continuous access to information and guidance as regards the rights and responsibilities of immigrants; as well as prompt personal data information that keep each immigrant informed of the processing stages of his/her application for refugee status. Needless to say, all this has to be communicated in the language that the immigrant understands best.

In prevailing circumstances when an individual does not qualify for refugee status or temporary humanitarian protection, this person should be sent back to his/her country of origin at the very earliest. We understand that this process of repatriation is not as plain sailing as one would like it to be; nonetheless, it is, under no specific circumstance, acceptable for such people who are refused status to find themselves barred from the right to seek and take up employment, from medical assistance, from the provision of the necessary

travelling documents, etc. As long as repatriation remains a stumbling block, such people deserve to be given the basic, adequate means to make a decent living.

We find ourselves confronted with equally difficult situations when immigrants are granted temporary humanitarian status but refused refugee status. Their frustration gets even worse; it gets beyond their comprehension to come to terms with the harsh realities. Refusal of refugee status bars them from being able to join their families. During such sensitive episodes when the immigrants find themselves under great mental disturbance and emotional stress, they would be more in need of psychological than material support. Such support would help them understand their position in line with the parameters of the asylum process. Even those who would put their case before the Appeals' Board would require continuous help and support during the process. They would need to be informed of the best way in which they can get in contact with the lawyer who can give them legal assistance; other than the fact, that they would require regular briefings to help them come to terms with, and understand, the different stages the whole process would take.

The Emigrants' Commission agrees that the service of a social worker or other trained personnel for this matter, is essentially crucial. Such provision should be made available to every immigrant. The validity of this recommendation should be unquestionable and cannot be over-emphasised. In fact, such service should be available to the asylum seeker from day one when he/she reaches our shores until the day when he/she is off to settle elsewhere outside our country. With hindsight, we agree that such provision would, by long term projection, help to alleviate significantly the unnecessary hardships and frustrations of the individual immigrant. Collectively, it would also ease significantly the levels of high tension in the present scenario.

- *Out in the Community*

The personnel of the Emigrants' Commission (which is strictly regarded as the first utility point of reference) are the very first people the asylum seekers would seek to consult immediately they step out of the Reception Centre. Somehow or other, they manage to get to our office and thereafter they are helped and guided to:

- reach a Polyclinic to be issued the relevant medical certificate that verifies that they are free from any infectious disease;
- apply for the issue of their identity card;
- visit the Refugee Commissioner's office to be given the relevant official documents, which they need to keep in their possession;
- register for work;
- apply for the issue of the passport document;
- enrol their children in school; as well as other varied requirements. In a nutshell, we are at their beck and call; to meet their manifold needs for as long as they stay in our country.

But this experience prompts us, once again, to make our *recommendations* in spite of the fact that we have been making the same requests for ages. It is hoped that this time around these recommendations will not fall on deaf ears.

We propose that the necessary course of action to see to the provision of the essential documentation (reference to which is made in the preceding paragraph) is carried out during the time spent in the Reception Centre. The absence of this documentation creates hardship and postpones unnecessarily the time when the children can start school, the possibility of finding a residence, the acquisition of the passport document, to name but a few needs. Again, if action is taken as we are proposing, the identity card could be given immediately they leave the Reception Centre. The identity card should also include the official imprint that the holder has been granted permission to work in line with the official status he/she has been given. Unless this situation changes, the immigrant will, as at present, be forced to wait for about four weeks more to get permission to work. Add to this the fact that he/she is made to pay twenty five Maltese liri, and two Maltese liri and seventy five cents for the photos (66 euros in all). Usually the Emigrants' Commission forks out these amounts; in some cases, the amount is refunded when the asylum seeker finds employment.

- Work and Training

Every person under temporary humanitarian protection is also made to apply and pay ten Maltese Liri each time he/she changes employment. This norm is often keeping the immigrant away from adhering to its practice. With the resultant consequence that this is creating the unfortunate situation whereby the immigrant worker can be easily exploited by the employer. We come face to face with harsh realities - like the case of the immigrant worker who required fourteen stitches to his head because of his plea with his employer to get paid for the five weeks' work he had done; the hard, often menial, labour an immigrant is given against the low payment he/she is given in return. Besides the absence of compensation when the immigrant worker gets hurt during work. We have had cases such as that of one worker who lost one of his fingers, of another who had his arm squashed in some machinery, of other who had to have one of his feet amputated. Such tragedies make us, sorrowfully, hold our breath for long. The necessary legal structures should be put in place to prevent such situations and provide relief in such tragic cases.

We would also like to mention the case of the refugee who is entitled to work but not as a self employed person. Thereby, he/she has no right to employ other workers; and, if he /she has any offspring, they are not entitled to work before they reach the age of eighteen.

Similarly, a case in point concerns certain unaccompanied minors who have had to stop the course they were following at the MCAST a year ago. They could not follow an apprenticeship course as the very nature of the course would have required them to do their apprenticeship (their work phase) before they were eighteen years of age.

- Accommodation

Furthermore, when an immigrant prefers to find alternative accommodation other than the Emigrants' Commission's Open Centre and cluster homes, he/she is left with little choice, if any at all. The immigrant needs to abide by the Acquisition of Immovable Property (AIP) Law and he/she can only buy an apartment that would cost not less than thirty thousand Maltese liri and, if a house, not less than fifty thousand liri (an average of 72,000 euros and 120,000 euros respectively). Currently, we are informed of eight refugees who have applied

for housing assistance but, to date, none of them has as yet been forwarded any reply following their written requests.

- *'Returners'*

Another problem concerns the ones who are deported back to Malta following their attempt to try their luck and settle abroad. This happens even when the persons who travel own a regular passport document accompanied by the formality of an official temporary humanitarian status. This u-turn holds validity as Malta forms part of the Eurodac system; in practical terms, it results that any neighbouring country to Malta has the right to refuse settlement to these immigrants. We have had instances when the persons concerned had been away from the island for a good number of months. Often by the time that they return to our country, their place will have been taken up by somebody else.

- *Citizenship*

Yet another area of great apprehension concerns the citizenship issue. We have a complement of fifty five refugees who qualify for citizenship status because they have been in Malta for more than five years. A number of them have married Maltese nationals, speak fluent Maltese, have fixed employment, have their children attending local schools and have befriended Maltese nationals; yet, to date, not a single one of them has been granted citizenship status! On our part, we propose that the people with the right for this official status should be given a residence permit that encapsulates all the rights that are synonymous to this status.

Proposals

As a result of these prevailing situations, the Emigrants' Commission feels in duty bound to forward, once again, the following set of proposals. In effect, reference to these proposals and to the scenario referred to above has already been made verbally during the Emigrants' Commission presentation at the National Conference on "Irregular Immigration" which was held on the 7th and 8th February of the current year.

In parenthesis, we feel the need to state that in the National Policy Document (*titled "Irregular Immigrants, Refugees and Integration" and co-published by the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs and the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity shortly before the national conference referred to in the preceding paragraph*), there is no reference to our proposals. We sincerely trust that the necessary course of action will be taken without further delay; to put the *legal* and *administrative* framework of all proposals in place.

- *Set of Proposals*

- (a) *On the very day* of the immigrant's release from the Reception Centre, he/she *should receive the Identity Card*. This card should also include the official authentication that the person in question is entitled to work for the period of time which tallies with his/her Status Certificate;

- (b) *The right to employment should start at the age of sixteen.* It should, furthermore, be the responsibility of the social worker and/or doctor to work out, especially when there is a doubtful case, the correct approximate age of the minor who claims that he/she is under age;
- (c) *All the medical screening that is required should take place during the period of time spent in the Reception Centre.* If need be, adequate medical attention, care and supervision should also be given immediately this is required;
- (d) *Refugees should be given permission to buy property* without adhering to the shackles of the AIP code of regulations. At the same time, they should also enjoy entitlement *to equal opportunity to social housing accommodation;*
- (e) In cases *where repatriation is not a feasible solution, and* as such, these people find themselves *denied asylum protection,* adequate provision should be made to give these people *the right to make a decent living;*
- (f) Every person with a refugee status or a temporary humanitarian protection should be entitled to a *residence permit;*
- (g) When people with temporary humanitarian protection and with children find themselves fending without the support of the other parent/guardian to help in the children's rearing and upbringing, *all effort should be made to re-unite them all as one whole family;*
- (h) While the asylum application is being processed, the immigrant should have *the right to get continuous feedback on every development and decision taken during the whole process;* at the same time, it is vital that this communication is carried out *in the language that the person concerned understands best;*
- (i) Every immigrant *should be assigned the professional, caring service of a social worker;* in practical terms, the social worker is expected to ethically guide and follow his/her client's needs until the time when the immigrant leaves our country or integrates safely and securely within our community.

From the first-hand experience it has gained over the years, the Emigrants' Commission acknowledges that the set of proposals it is forwarding do not present complex issues that necessitate long term projection. On the contrary, it believes that the realisation of almost the absolute majority of its proposals should be prioritised within the *immediate short term* projection. It is also hopeful that its participation and contributory role in this EU Civil Society Project would strengthen its position in tangible terms.

At the same time, the Emigrants' Commission welcomes all proposals included in the National Policy Document referred to earlier. In a nutshell, there is the ultimate need for the design and introduction of a considerable number of new structures, services and, not least, meaningful investment for the future.

More General Issues

With the same positive spirit, the Emigrants' Commission would like to draw attention to further *issues of a general nature;* precisely, to generate a genuine and collaborative effort for a more systematic approach towards a stronger partnership with all interested stakeholders and the strengthening of effectiveness in the realisation of policy projects.

These include:

- *Civil Society*

Strengthening civil society is important for several reasons. It is recommended that there be put in place a policy dialogue between civil society and the government. In addition, the strengthening of civil society can contribute to the empowerment of marginalised parts of society which again can lead to poverty reduction and the development of a more just society.

When the EU supports NGO projects, not only does it spend its funds highly efficiently and make an important contribution to the reduction of injustices and poverty, but it also furthers the development of a vibrant civil society.

As a matter of fact, the importance of close links with the multi-sector alliances of society involved in refugee issues cannot be more strongly emphasised. Such alliances should seek the involvement of representations from the media, political parties, local councils and businesses, the police, governmental organisations and other associations. They should work in harmony with all refugee community representatives.

Social cohesion is best served by an inclusive and welcoming approach to cultural diversity, which emphasises shared values. This creates the need to promote positive images of refugees and their contribution to society and to formulate media messages based upon well-documented and comprehensive information, to improve the public's perception of refugees.

Trade Unions can also play an important part in promoting positive attitudes, dispelling prejudice in the workplace. It is recommended that trade unions take measures to educate their members on 'diversity management' in the work place. They can also engage in lobbying major employers and/or employers' associations and in highlighting the potential contributions refugees can make in the workplace.

- *Non-Governmental Organisations*

It is commendable that, over the last two decades, the partnership between the European Commission and NGOs has expanded on all fronts. This intensification has covered a range of issues, from policy dialogue and policy delivery, to project and programme management, both within the EU and its partner countries. This results from a number of interwoven factors, related both to changes and development within the EU institutions themselves, as well as to developments within the NGO Community.

Although the Commission's current practice clearly proves its willingness to maintain and strengthen its partnership with NGOs, the structures and procedures involved have not kept up with this.

The complexity of EC policies as well as the growing number of regulations and funding sources (budget line) coupled with recent financial security problems have created a great

deal of uncertainty for NGOs about co-operation with the Commission. The need is felt to put the relationship on a new footing. Provision should be made for improved methods of dialogue and consultation.

It is the prerogative of NGOs (*not least, the Emigrants' Commission*) to focus, in functional terms, on both operational and advocacy activities. From the operational standpoint, NGOs can contribute to the delivery of services (such as in the field of welfare); whereas, at the advocacy level, the primary aim of NGOs should be to influence the policies of public authorities and public opinion in general.

Therefore, the rationale of co-operation is grounded on five main considerations:

(a) the fostering of participatory democracy

The European Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, principles which are common to the Member States.

The right of citizens to form associations to pursue a common purpose is a fundamental freedom of democracy. Increasingly, NGOs should all the more be recognised as significant components of civil society and as providing valuable support for a democratic system of government. NGOs deserve notice and involvement in the policy and decision-making process.

(b) representing the views of specific groups of citizens to the European Institutions

The role of NGOs in representing to the European Institutions the views of specific groups of citizens (for this purpose, the immigrants' case) shows the ability to reach the poorest and most disadvantaged and to provide a voice for those not sufficiently heard through other channels.

NGOs' involvement in policy shaping and policy implementation helps to win public acceptance for the EU. In some cases, NGOs can act as a balance to the activities and opinions of other interests in society.

(c) contributing to policy making

The specific expertise that NGOs can contribute to policy discussions is unquestionable. NGOs can provide expert input for EU policy-making. In particular, they can provide feedback on the success or otherwise of specific policies thereby contributing to the Commission's task of defining and implementing policies by fully taking into account its overall public policy responsibility.

(d) contributing to project management

The specific expertise and valid contribution of NGOs in managing, monitoring and evaluating projects financed by the EU are particularly important in tackling social

exclusion and discrimination, and the provision of humanitarian and development aid. The expertise and dedication of NGOs staff and their willingness to work under difficult operational conditions mean that NGOs are vital partners for the Commission both within the EU and beyond.

(e) contributing to European integration and co-operation

When NGOs work together to achieve common goals, this contributes to promoting European integration and co-operation in a practical way and often at grassroots level.

Moreover, the ability of European NGO associations and networks to channel and focus the views of the various national NGOs is very useful for the Commission.

Therefore, strengthening the relationship between the Commission and NGOs can help both parties to be more successful in achieving their respective goals. At the same time, *the Commission will need to recognise and support the development and independence of the NGO sector.*

- *EU Funding*

NGOs are aware of the low ratio of staff to financial resources in the European Commission. This, however, should not be the reason to finance only big projects. *Small projects can have a big impact.*

And the validity of this is all the more important to our country because the size of Malta calls for small projects in comparison to other countries. However, experience should teach us that size is not necessarily the decisive factor. The criterion for the funding decision should be the quality of the project not its size. Administration should be organised in a way that allows for effective development cooperation and not the other way round.

Furthermore, there is lack of sufficient information for NGOs in particular on funding and financial procedures. Better guidance on application procedures and more comprehensible application forms would be appreciated. When seeking information on funding, NGOs need different types of information at different stages in the application process, starting with general information on what is available, specific information on the criteria for the various grant programmes and details on how and when to apply.

The Emigrants' Commission cannot stress enough the need of getting this support (be it direct funding for the implementation and maintenance of different projects or indirect funding through the provision of different support services); truthfully, this will determine the extent of its operational and advocacy functions for the benefit of all asylum seekers.

- *Access to Education*

Education is a powerful tool in the process of adaptation and social integration. It promotes the personal development of refugees while at the same time it will be improving their chances to contribute to the host society through participation in the labour market.

Tuition should be a right and obligation until a satisfactory level of educational competency is reached. Special arrangements should be made for carers in terms of assistance with child-care facilities.

In fact, tuition arrangements need to be accessible and tailored to the needs and education requirements of refugees. A range of different education programmes and courses should be made available including intensive/accredited courses, courses dealing with problems of literacy and/or geared vocational training/career development.

Research has shown that, for refugees, following mainstream education programmes is the most successful route to finding later employment commensurate with their qualifications, skills and professional experience.

Once again we highlight the need to make provision for refugees receiving vocational training in our country to qualify for work phase experiences during their course of study. This can be done if, for the purpose of these courses, the age limit for a work permit is lowered from eighteen to sixteen.

Regular schooling for refugee children is so very essential. In fact, schools should play a key role not only as centres of knowledge acquisition but equally importantly as places of formal and informal preparation for the holistic development of refugee children to live harmoniously in a new society - that is in pluralist societies.

This calls for intercultural training which should be widely available in order to sensitise teachers and school staff to the effect of refugee experiences on children's learning processes. Such training is recommended to form part of the teacher training curriculum. Awareness-raising might be necessary with curriculum development bodies, including the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta and the Curriculum Department, Education Division.

Ideally, the Education Division should seek to support the development of appropriate methodologies to assess prior education gaps in refugee children's progress, recognise competency in language skills and develop the appropriate benchmarks to assess the different skills. It should ensure that there are sufficient and appropriate resources to facilitate learning for refugee children in schools, and should consider the availability of learning materials designed specifically for refugee children. The provision of facilitators within the normal stream setting is also advised. At the same time, refugee parents and carers should be empowered to participate in the education of their children.

- Access to housing

Shelter is a basic human right and necessity. The conditions in which people live determine to a great extent their health, well-being and ability to engage in gainful occupation, pursue self improvement through education and recreation and in consequence attain a decent standard of living.

It is a known fact that there are considerable differences in housing provision for refugees in European countries. In some countries, local municipalities allocate housing to refugees on the basis of a system or availability of accommodation. In other countries, refugees have to find housing in the private or public housing sectors.

In our case, as the need for housing is often for short term accommodation, we offer Open Centres, like the one we have already made reference to, that is the Balzan Residential Complex, and Cluster Home Accommodation whereby we have a limited number of houses (16) that can accommodate up to one, two or more families depending on the spatial area of the dwelling place in question. Needless to say, consideration is given to the presence of family ties or community links when refugees are to be settled, as well as to employment and educational opportunities. Presently, there seems to be the indication of making provision for the setting up of another residential complex, this time at Marsa. So far, the building site, which was previously a small trade school, has been earmarked; although progression of structural work alterations is still at a halt. No formal decisions have been taken as yet but it seems likely that it would be a joint venture between the State and the Emigrants' Commission.

At the same time, upon receiving permission to stay, persons with refugee status should be given full access to housing rights on the same basis as our nationals. In fact, reference has been made earlier to the need to waive the application of the AIP code of regulations at the very earliest. This is proving to be a taxing burden, a hidden discrimination, on the ones who would otherwise be interested in buying property.

- Access to the Labour Market

A review of recent international research related to refugee employment suggests that employers are not sufficiently aware of the skills and economic potential of refugees. Some employers experience difficulties assessing overseas qualifications and work experience.

It is a sad fact that, in our country, most of the refugees end up doing menial jobs; in some cases, they are also underpaid for the work that they do. Plus the fact, that, as has been referred to earlier in this presentation, employment regulations and restrictions risk pushing such people into illegal work or dependency on public assistance.

At this stage, it is also worth noting that *increasing refugee women's participation in employment programmes* through provision of information on employment and social assistance rights and assistance with childcare or transport/mobility difficulties should also be given special attention. Women need to be helped to overcome barriers; provision for flexi-services and opportunities should be made available to encourage them to utilise training and educational opportunities. *Women need to undertake new roles in support of themselves and their families.*

In particular, these limitations can be viewed as being in violation of the UN Convention of the Status of Refugees. This convention urges national governments to grant refugees unconditional rights to employment and automatic work permits on the same basis as nationals.

A key component of employment interventions could be the establishment of partnerships between institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce, public and private sector employers, development agencies, trade unions and employment advice providers. We need to develop initiatives to raise awareness of employers and ensure recruitment policies and practices to enable refugees to access jobs in both the private and public sectors. Refugees are, indeed, entitled to be involved continuously in the design, implementation and evaluation of strategies addressing their needs.

Conclusion

It is sincerely hoped that the issues raised in this paper are truly given their due attention by the Authorities concerned, be they the State, the NGOs and the EU. Since the National Conference which was held a couple of months ago, precisely in February, 2005, not much effort and progress of work have been reported to put into place the recommended structures and to get on with the implementation of the required work.

Earlier on in this paper, reference has been made to the concept of Burden-Sharing. It seems most appropriate to end by highlighting once again the importance of putting the philosophy behind this principle into practice. We cannot leave all the talk that is said (not least at the international fora!), about this concept on paper; unfortunately, sad to state, this is the stage where we have been for a long time now. Let us take this opportunity to speak loudly and clearly : Let all countries roll up their sleeves, and, to the best of their abilities, ensure that they do their utmost in full liaison and support with each other.