



# Mayo Intercultural Action (MIA)

Promoting the positive effects of interculturalism in Irish society

Spring/Earrach 2009

Newsletter/Nuachtlitir

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## Where next for MIA?

As we write, the future looks bleak for MIA. The funding which allowed our organisation to grow and to achieve important work comes to an end on Thursday, May 7th. This will be a sad day for all the committed people who, over the years, put hours and days of their time into building MIA up. But it will be an even sadder day for the many hundreds of vulnerable people in Mayo who will be left without a dedicated place to turn to.

Since MIA was established activities have been wide-ranging: from arts projects to information sessions, from training courses to legal advice. Most of all MIA has been a friendly, trustworthy, efficient and reliable port of call for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers throughout the county.



Photo: Alison Laredo

But we are not going down without a fight. A Strategic Plan is in place for the next three years and an external evaluation of our work has just been completed by an independent consultant. We have made – and are still making – multiple approaches to all and any potential backers of our work. Let's hope a last-minute solution is found to our predicament.

## A bit of history...

In 1999, the Irish government announced that it would soon be dispersing asylum seekers from Dublin to the four corners of Ireland. The first seeds of MIA were sown. A small group of people got together and formed the Westport Refugee Support Group. Volunteers did what they could to support refugees as they settled into hostels in places such as Cong, Ballycastle and Castlebar. They sourced legal advice, offered outings, brought toys and second hand clothes. They organised awareness-raising events for schools and for the media.

Their name changed to Mayo Refugee Support Group and then, finally, in 2004, Mayo Intercultural Action (MIA) was founded. By now Ireland was changing more rapidly than anyone could have foretold and the arrival of hundreds of migrant workers in Mayo, added to the growing numbers of asylum seekers living in Ballyhaunis (opened 2003) and Kiltimagh (opened 2004), made MIA's work both more demanding and more vital.

Still functioning as a voluntary group, MIA commissioned a ground breaking publication: *Building a Diverse Mayo - a report on immigration, integration & service provision*. It was launched in December 2006 by former Irish President and human rights champion, Mary Robinson. In May 2007 MIA was finally successful in securing funding - for two years - through the Dormant Accounts Scheme. The money was administered by Pobal and MIA entered into a partnership with Meitheal Mhaighéo to run the Naise Nua project, with Thérèse Ruane as coordinator. Jackie Costelloe and Bridget Breen later joined the staff of MIA under the Community Employment Scheme.

MIA can boast many landmark achievements: in July 2008 volunteer Ailish Irvine won a Vodafone 'World of Difference' Award on MIA's behalf, allowing her to work for a full year in MIA; in June 2008, Thérèse Ruane won a World Refugee Day Award; and in November last, MIA was nominated for a Metro Eireann MAMA Award.

Through the single-mindedness of staff and volunteers, MIA has played a pivotal role in putting immigration and integration firmly on the map in Mayo.



**International Women's Day** was celebrated in style in MIA. Here, Sheila, Mary, Faith and Caroline proudly display the communal quilt they worked on together with other members of the Ballyhaunis Women's Group.

Photo: Alison Laredo

## Why MIA matters....

From boom to bust. Anyone who dared to predict a sudden end to Ireland's unreal prosperity was chased away like the spectre at the feast. Yet here we are in the depths of a recession that no-one seems fully to understand.

One thing is clear: survival will be dramatically difficult for those whose position in Irish society is insecure. By definition this includes all those MIA has been working to support and encourage over the years: migrant workers/unemployed, asylum seekers, refugees and those granted leave to remain in the country.

Recent surveys show that migrants have been losing their jobs at twice the rate of Irish workers. If they have been in the country for less than two years they do not qualify for state support. At the same time, it has also been shown that 50 per cent of economic migrants living in rural areas of Ireland intend to stay.

In times of economic hardship it is easy for the 'outsider' to be scape-goated. The threat of racism grows. In a rural county like Mayo, isolation, poor transport, mental health problems and scant support services are all aggravated. For those fortunate enough still to be employed, the risk of exploitation increases.

For asylum seekers and refugees little will change. They will remain overwhelmed by the problems they face each day, institutionalised by hostel life, living on a meagre handout (unchanged since 2001) and denied child benefit; grieving the loss of home and family; facing an uncertain future; locked in legal limbo; powerless. Already labelled as 'uninvited guests' at the national table, they will remain the forgotten victims of an imperfect and malfunctioning system.

It is at such a time that organisations like MIA are needed most. Yet it is at such a time, too, that MIA's existence is under threat.

## MIA sends aid to Gaza

In January, MIA joined with the Galway-based *Palestine Children's Charity* in an appeal for food, clothing and medicines for the people of Gaza. Here, Elaine Sheridan (on work placement with MIA from N.U.I. Maynooth) and Noeline Crowe (volunteer with MIA) sort through donations.



Photo: Alison Laredo



Naisc Nua was set up in 2006 to help people living in Mayo who have refugee status or who have been granted leave to remain in the country, including the parents of Irish-born children, to achieve meaningful integration in the life of the County through training and employment. This is a joint initiative with Meitheal Mhaigheo, funded through Pobal under the Dormant Accounts Scheme.

## Driver Theory Course



A group of asylum seekers from the Railway Hotel attended a driver theory preparation course facilitated by MIA in Kiltimagh CDP in March. The course was run by **Grace McGee**, a social studies student from Castlebar College of Further Education on work experience with MIA. **Noel Gibbons** of Mayo County Council spoke to the group on road safety. Passing the driving test is an important part of accessing employment and training in Ireland. The group expressed thanks to all concerned for offering them this assistance in getting their theory test.

## Pathways to Employment and Training

Over a hundred people, from sixteen different countries, attended an evening seminar - *Pathways to Employment and Training* - organised by MIA last September.

Many organisations participated with information stands, including the GMIT, VEC, CIS, LES, South West Mayo Development Company, Meitheal Mhaigheo, Emerge Skillnet and E-Business School, Kiltimagh. Mary Safo from Ghana was delighted with the evening. "A night like this was long awaited," she said, "where immigrants in Mayo could walk into a room and have access to all the providers of education and of social and entrepreneurial support in the one place. We are all happy to attend such a well thought out event."

## Looking back / Ag féachaint siar.....

When Naisc Nua started out, these were some of the barriers to training and employment identified by the people this project was created to support:

- access to education, training and employment
- childcare and family-friendly working hours
- racism and discrimination
- access to information
- English language difficulties
- recognition of educational qualifications
- exploitation in the workplace
- people setting up their own businesses

### *So what did we achieve?*

- we have increased the confidence of our target groups through information and support
- we have fostered trust between these groups and established services in Mayo
- we have offered education/training and employment opportunities
- we have approached government departments, service providers and employers, informing debate and improving policy-making processes
- we have proved ourselves as a potential resource and a model of good practice
- we have sown the seeds of integration, equality and equal opportunities for all
- we have proved how much this kind of programme of activity is needed in the current economic climate

### *Two years later.....*

Naisc Nua has achieved what it set out to do. The project transformed the lives of many individuals and groups who came into contact with Naisc Nua and MIA. However there is no room for complacency. Many of the barriers the new communities have to confront are still there. What more proof is needed that projects like Naisc Nua are vital to ensuring full migrant participation in the economic and social life of Ireland?

## Jobs Club in MIA



Naisc Nua has run a series of successful Jobs Clubs facilitated by Jackie Brennan from Mayo North East Partnership. The latest was held in January. Activities took place each morning from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in MIA's offices and the course lasted three weeks.

The Jobs Club is a great way for people to gain expertise in CV preparation, interview skills and to learn how to go about looking for a job. For people coming from other countries and cultures, it helps them to understand how things work in Ireland.

Photo: Participants in the Jobs Club held in January 2009

## Record Attendance at Fundraising Event

There was a record turnout at the one-day seminar on Company Law for Not-for-Profit Organisations which took place in MIA's offices on 10th March.

The course was delivered in aid of MIA by Cyril McGinty of Ryan McGinty, Chartered Accountants, Galway. Thirty-seven people attended and each received a professionally prepared pack of documents including Minutes, Notices, Consents, Resolutions, Company Registration Office Forms, Proxy Forms, etc (to the value of €279.00) absolutely free. Over €2,000 was raised for MIA. Go raibh míle maith agat, Cyril!



## Making A World of Difference

In July 2008 I began work with MIA as Education, Training and Employment Facilitator. Before starting my job, I was aware of some of the obstacles people face but daily contact with people the Celtic Tiger never found has opened my eyes to the huge need for more supports for migrants.

MIA operates a drop in service offering advice and information about opportunities in further education and employment. I meet people every day who are trying to get a better life for themselves and their families but who come up against barriers which prevent them from enjoying the same supports as Irish people. In some cases, residency issues prohibit them from attending college; in others, it's a lack of finance. Very often their confidence and belief in themselves has diminished because of years living in uncertainty. They dare not dream or hope for a better future.

The supports we offer in MIA allow people to enrol in further education programmes. We help them over smaller obstacles along the way - familial circumstances or financial worries. We have helped people to get work experience in their chosen field or, if they have set up their own business, to access advice around legal requirements and financial reporting.



Most importantly, we have created a place where people can come and feel they are being listened to. A place where they can start to dream.

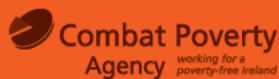
Ailish Irvine

Winner of *Vodafone World of Difference Award*, 2008.

## Primary Health Care Project

MIA was allocated €10,000 by Combat Poverty to run a unique project making sure migrant voices are heard in Primary Health Care teams. Of ten projects funded nationwide, MIA's is the only one to focus specifically on migrant needs.

The Ballina-based pilot scheme, run in partnership with the HSE and overseen by Michelle Rooney and Rose Mary Abu for MIA, is made up of three parts: training for migrant participants; health needs assessment; documenting the process so that the learning can be shared with other primary health teams throughout the country. Two seminars are planned in the near future and will be advertised locally.



## Run for MIA in the Women's Mini Marathon

The annual women's mini marathon takes place in Dublin on Monday, June 1st (Bank Holiday Monday). This is a great way to get fit, have guaranteed fun and help raise funds for MIA. Just ask your friends and family to sponsor you and you will be helping MIA in its hour of need.



If you would like to walk, or run, the Flora Women's Mini Marathon in aid of MIA just contact Jackie or Bridget in the office at 094 9044511 or e-mail [miamayo@eircom.net](mailto:miamayo@eircom.net)

## Common Threads – Snaith Coitianta

Eight talented women took part in an exciting joint project between MIA and Ireland's National Museum in Turlough (Castlebar). The women - from Burma, Nigeria, Poland and Russia – produced work of high technical quality in weaving, dressmaking, crochet and embroidery under the guidance of community artist Carmel Balfe.

The resulting exhibition of fabric craft – **Common Threads** – was opened by Tony Candon, head of the folklife division and manager of the Museum. MIA's thanks and congratulations go not only to the eight women involved but to Carmel Balfe for her inspirational role and to Deirdre Power, of the Museum's Education & Outreach Department, who embraced the idea with enthusiasm and made sure that a beautiful catalogue accompanied the women's work.

The participants in the project were: Faoziya Yussuf, Olanike Ogundare, Favour Ezenna (Nigeria); Phaw Shee Hta, Hsar Bway Say, Mi Nyel Win (Burma); Joanna Kuruc (Poland); Natalia Pestova (Russia).



*Members of the Ballyhaunis Women's Group on an outing to the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life in Turlough House.*

## Weaving Lives Together

For a whole day last August MIA was a hive of activity as sixty people from more than twenty different cultural backgrounds dropped into the office to take part in an innovative weaving project.

French artist and weaver, Merovée Guerin, a long-time resident of Mayo, facilitated the project, teaching the process of weaving to each person individually and working with a wide range of fabrics, fibres and textiles.

The result is a woven mural which is on permanent display in MIA's offices.

"It's great to come together like this and meet people from other backgrounds, to be part of something we all created together," said Jevgenia, a participant from Estonia who was on the management committee of MIA. "Every time I come into MIA I see the piece we created and remember the great day we had."

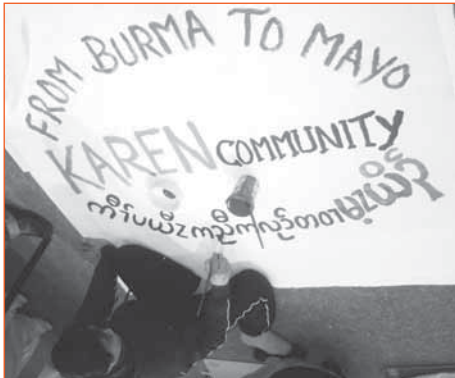
A big merci to Merovée for her time and for sharing her skills so generously.



*Jevgenia, from Estonia, prepares her thread for the woven mural*



## Photo Gallery - Grianghraif



MIA would like to extend its warmest wishes to the Karen community who have contributed so much to the life of our organisation since they arrived over a year ago. Always ready and willing to share their numerous talents and great energy, the Karen are very welcome members of the Castlebar and Ballina communities.



Volunteerism was the theme of MIA's Christmas celebration. Here, Thérèse congratulates Russian volunteer, Natalia, for her continuing contribution to MIA. Natalia recently graduated from the Human Rights Centre in Galway with a Masters in Human Rights. l-r.: Bridget Breen, Thérèse Ruane, Natalia Pestova, Mick Smyth and Cyril McGinty



Mary Robinson took time out of her busy schedule last July to visit MIA and meet members of the migrant community in Mayo. Is cara mór le MIA í. Mary enjoyed her visit. "When I came into the room," she said, "there were people from Nigeria, Somalia and Asia singing a song from Burma." The visit featured on RTÉ One's *Would You Believe?*



Bríd Kivneen volunteered her huge artistic gifts to facilitate a silk painting workshop in Ballyhaunis last autumn. In the picture, everyone is wearing a scarf which they made and painted themselves.



Dr. Rose Mary Abu is a central figure of MIA. "Getting involved with MIA has been great for me. It provides me with so many opportunities and it's great to be able to contribute to the work of MIA – to give something back to the community." Rose Mary is a qualified medical practitioner and is part of MIA's Primary Health Care Project.



Ella (Poland), Olga (Ukraine) and Veegy (S.Africa), all active volunteers with MIA, enjoying MIA's Christmas Party.



Despite the rain and wind, a large crowd attended a candlelit vigil in solidarity with the people of Gaza which MIA organised on Friday 16th January on Market Square, Castlebar. Many thanks to John McDonagh whose help was greatly appreciated in organising this event.



Now becoming an annual event, Caroline Quinn holds a popular Christmas wreath-making workshop in MIA. We really appreciate Caroline's voluntary contribution.



MIA took part in *Féile on the Mall* in Castlebar last August. The MIA tent was a hive of activity with drumming (by Anthony McNamee, above), singing, henna tattoos and hair braiding. Many thanks to all who volunteered their talents on the day.



Áine Conneely, Paw Shee Taw and Ailish Kerr at the English Language Social Club which meets every Tuesday in MIA. Áine, Ailish and Noeline Crowe are all volunteer teachers for MIA and they do an amazing job. Maith sibhsle!



Thérèse has her hands tattooed with henna during the Ballyhaunis Open Day organised by artists Bryan Duffy and Vukasin Nedeljkovic in July 2008 as part of a series of weekly arts workshops held over the summer months.

Newsletter compiled by  
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Go raibh míle maith agat!

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