

The Advocacy Initiative

Case Study 4: The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI)

‘Justice for the Undocumented’ Campaign: Empowering those with no voice to act collectively and to speak directly to decision makers



Ariel photograph on St. Patricks Day 2011

Background

There are an estimated 30,000 undocumented migrants including children and families living in Ireland. Most have been in Ireland for several years working and paying taxes, and have become deeply rooted within Irish communities.

MRCI has been working with undocumented migrants and their families since 2001. In the two year period from July 2009 to July 2011, MRCI provided information and support to 1,250 undocumented migrants from 75 different nationalities. Many have been with the same employer for several years. Due to their irregular immigration status undocumented migrants are much more vulnerable to mistreatment. Faced with few options and alternatives, they are forced to stay in exploitative situations.

MRCI began a campaign in 2010 to achieve a fair and responsible solution for the undocumented that recognises and balances the issues and concerns of undocumented migrants and the State. MRCI proposed an Earned Regularisation Scheme. Such a scheme would give undocumented people and their families living in Ireland a window of opportunity to come forward and earn their way to permanent residency status. Upon registering for the scheme and paying a fine, eligible applicants would be granted a temporary residency status. Then individuals would work their way to earning permanent residency status by meeting specific criteria such as working, paying taxes and contributing to the community over a limited time period.

CASE STUDIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY

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Approach

The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland is committed to a 'community work approach to push for justice through collectivising experiences and building power with undocumented migrants' and to working with the most vulnerable groups in Irish society. To realise this MRCI worked to create the conditions for the emergence of the Justice for the Undocumented Campaign Group (JUCG). The JUCG is made up of undocumented migrants who have come together to work for a solution for all undocumented migrants in Ireland. The group is working collectively through building broad-based support for earned regularisation.

To achieve the active and critical participation of undocumented immigrants it was necessary to understand and address the barriers which make participation in such a campaign especially difficult. Having an appropriate strategy for engagement was therefore key to the campaign. Initial individual contact was made to address individual fears of detection and to build trust. This first contact through the MRCI's Resource Centre thus began to connect the individual with the structural and political elements of their situation.

In May 2010 a small group of undocumented migrants was brought together to discuss the changes needed and from these meetings the core group of the Justice for the Undocumented Group (JFU) was formed. Small ongoing campaign introduction meetings (6 to 10 people) continue to be held to bring new people into the campaign.

Key messages were agreed to communicate the campaign and a logo developed to reflect the message. MRCI consciously decided not to adopt an adversarial approach to this campaign but rather to 'bring people along' and to engage positively with decision makers. Endorsement were sought and obtained from allies such as Barnardos, St. Vincent de Paul etc...

Direct action in the form of a candle-lit march in December 2011 and the creation of a human shamrock on St. Patrick's Day provided a visible and tangible opportunity for people to get involved in a process for change. These types of actions have built confidence, dispelled fears and have seen the group grow exponentially.



Justice for the Undocumented Vigil, Dec 2011, Photo by: Derek Speirs

Success Achieved

Significant numbers of the undocumented are now actively involved in the campaign in a variety of ways. The media has covered the issue in a sympathetic way and political champions have been identified and are speaking out on the issue.

A petition with 4,000 signatures was presented to the Minister's Special Adviser in July 2012 by members of the JUDG.

Meetings have been held with Department of Justice officials and the Minister's Special Adviser to discuss how such a policy could be achieved.

Group members have made individual representations to TD's and local politicians and have resulted in the passing of motions of support from Dublin City Council, South Dublin and Fingal County Council.

A motion was also successfully passed by the Labour Party to support the introduction of an Earned Regularisation scheme.

Active participation by a previously hidden group has been achieved and has given a sense hope to those affected by this issue.

Learning

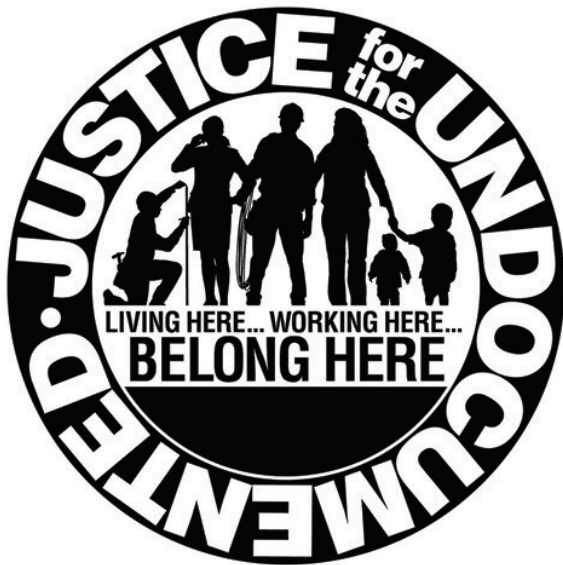
The key lessons from this campaign are:

- * The importance of developing a strategic plan to action the campaign.
- * The need to develop pragmatic responses to a specific problem which speaks to the middle ground.
- * The benefit of identifying and building on international, well researched models.
- * The importance of dialoguing with key officials with sound, practical, cost effective and a workable solution.
- * The need to communicate the solution to a range of audiences, policy makers, politicians, allies, and those affected by the issue through a short readable document which communicates the solution and key messages for the campaign.
- * The value of a community work approach which builds the critical participation of people affected by the issue through a politicisation process and collective action for change.
- * Fundamental to achieving success is the involvement of people directly affected by the issue to build skills, confidence and analysis to engage with politicians, civil servants and the media.
- * Recognising the importance of creating spaces and opportunities for people to be active in solutions which affect their lives at a range of levels, from meetings to workshops to events and actions.
- * The need to recognise the time it takes to engage people and grow a group of this kind.
- * Holding small regular evening induction meetings to enable ongoing membership growth.
- * The development of communication support tools and systems, such as a database, texting and online templates to communicate regularly with group members and allies.
- * Utilising online tools to engage people and promote mass participation, through an online petition and the use of social media.
- * Using direct action as a means to build participation and ensure visibility. Choosing key moments such as Christmas and St. Patrick's Day to take action and to communicate key messages.
- * Recognising the power of people's stories and the centrality of people affected by the issue to achieving a successful outcome.
- * The need to engage the media in an ongoing way, using a range to tactics and opportunities to highlight the campaign and get peoples stories in to the public domain.
- * The importance of creatively documenting actions to build confidence and using short 2-3 minute videos to communicate your message.

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The Future

The next steps are to continue to build participation within the group and engage new members to take action in their own localities and to continue to build political support at a local and national level.



Justice for the Undocumented logo

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