

# Servir

Jesuit Refugee Service

No. 45



## Struggling against xenophobia: the role of awareness, inclusion, participation and rights

Building identities based on human dignity

Articles from Italy, Ecuador, South Africa and the Dominican Republic

■ December 2008

# Institutionalising xenophobia is not the way forward

Fear paralyses, making for bad decisions

Peter Balleis SJ



When the state becomes the abuser, Dajabon, Dominican Republic, Giovanni Dalmás/ JRS

On a recent visit to a migrant detention centre in the south of the US, I asked some of the men where they came from. California, they replied, and not Mexico or another Central America country. They have been living in the US for years, one as many as 18 years. They crossed the border to find work, forced to do so by the poverty in their home countries – Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Mexico and war-torn Colombia.

They have contributed years of labour to the economy, their families are settled, and their children go to school. Discovered without permits to live and work in the US, they were abruptly taken from their families and detained, made to feel like criminals. By law, those without the right documents are illegally resident and must be deported. Since the 11 September attacks, fear of foreigners as potential terrorists has gripped the country and the Homeland Security Department has tightened border controls.

## Normal honest and hard working fathers and mothers are turned into criminals and a threat to the state

Once xenophobia – the fear of strangers – is put into the law, it easily translates into hostility against neighbours. Normal people, honest and hard working fathers and mothers, who only want to give their children, born as US citizens, a future, are turned into strangers, criminals and a threat to the state, only because they lack the right papers.

The fear of "the other" also imposes itself on migrants and refugees, even those who have lived in their adopted nations for years. Suddenly they no longer feel at ease. They become afraid of being arrested by the police. Once

in a detention centre, they become powerless and anxious about being deported back to their countries of origin, places they no longer consider home.

Writing xenophobia into the law creates a new form of forced displacement of migrants, who after having settled down, are forcibly displaced once again. This could be seen in the South African townships of Johannesburg last May. The xenophobic violence of South Africans displaced workers from Malawi and Mozambique, as well as Zimbabwean refugees. This is equally true for the European Union and its use of the law to prevent the arrival of migrants and refugees, forcing poorer southern and eastern neighbours to take responsibility for them.

## Fear is the worst enemy of human nature

Fear is the worst enemy of human nature, Saint Ignatius explains in the Spiritual Exercises to the retreatant. It paralyses us and causes us to take bad decisions. Fear of the stranger is the worst adviser of communities and states as they struggle to manage the phenomenon of human mobility, migration and forced displacement. Scared for their lives and their security, refugees are forced to flee their homes and seek safety elsewhere. With rising xenophobia, they again face anxiety and insecurity in their host countries.

This issue of Servir highlights the theme of xenophobia with examples from Italy, Ecuador, South Africa and the Dominican Republic. In all of these contexts, JRS is trying to find ways to attend to refugees and other forcibly displaced migrants affected by their hosts' mistaken perceptions of them. There, as in other parts of the world, staff and volunteers work with migrants and refugees, demonstrating that together there are ways forward. ♦



# Tackling the root causes of xenophobia

## Valuing difference

Richard Haasvisto, JRS Pedro Arrupe Tutor, Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University



Defending human rights and transcending ethnic and national identities, Guasdalito, Venezuela, Carlos de Castro

We are all born and live within a culture. Provided with a language, vocabulary and a sense of history, we are conditioned to prefer our own value system above all others. Our social relationships within society are rooted in the establishment of difference between "us" and "them", i.e. alterity. Today, the nation state has become the supra-community, the political union of a people allegedly sharing a common identity. In return for their allegiance, political, social and economic resources are made available to group members. This allegiance, constraining our way of thinking, behaving and identifying ourselves, excludes others, such as migrants and refugees. In the extreme, our responses to individuals of differing cultures, often called xenophobia, takes many forms: humiliation, discrimination, assimilation, violence and exclusion.

### A rights-based approach does not itself eradicate the causes of xenophobia

Most of the work to eradicate racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance has been focused on the ratification and effective implementation of relevant international and regional legal instruments. For those who experience forms of discrimination and xenophobia, these instruments send a powerful message to the majority on the values required to be a part of a nation. Human rights legislation can also provide practical protection to those perceived as outsiders or powerless, for instance in the case of access to employment and housing. However, a rights-based approach does not itself eradicate the causes of xenophobia. Providing protection to minorities risks being perceived as a threat to the majority. Moreover, an exclusive focus on individual rights through juridico-political citizenship minimises the significance of the rights of groups which are necessary to their well-being and dignity.

One way forward is to focus on the reconceptualisation of difference and its transcendence. The categorisation of difference needs to be questioned. Having delineated the causes constructing difference, the importance of historical events positively valuing intercultural affinity and diversity needs to be emphasised. This would allow us to re-imagine a new, positive relationship between cultural and political, social and economic values which enables an interaction between peoples based on human dignity. However, the lack of direct contact between outsiders (migrants and refugees) and insiders makes it possible for the reality and humanity of the former to be imagined and re-imagined to suit the negative image conjured up by their hosts. Apartheid logic with a preference for caricature and a reluctance to share a common humanity or citizenship with strangers from beyond the borders of civilisation prevails, underlining the need for combined rights-based and cosmopolitan approaches.

Tactical cosmopolitan, rather than community-based, approaches to constructing human society need to be favoured. This enables individuals to negotiate their inclusion into societies without becoming circumscribed by national and ethnic concepts of identity. The rights of the individual are no longer advanced at the expense of "the other" or to the exclusion of "the other". The emphasis needs to be on membership rather than legal rights. Social membership with "recognised" others provides the key to meaningful rights or citizenship claims. It is only through participation in socio-political life that individuals are ensured the self-respect and self-esteem they need to grow as persons. Without this membership, individuals face permanent insecurity as they will always be expected to return to their homelands even when their umbilical cords have been clearly cut. ♦

## Refugee stories open student minds

A JRS commitment to Italian schools

Chiara Peri, JRS Italy Assistant Programmes Officer

"My name is Marlen, I am 27 years old and I am a victim of torture, a victim of the war in my country, the Democratic Republic of Congo; however, I assure you there is little about it that is democratic". A few days after a student protest at the university, soldiers came to her home. Two men took her by the shoulders, another put a handkerchief in her mouth and pushed it down her throat. They blindfolded her and pushed her into a car, on the back seat lying on her front, and sat on top of her, to stop her moving. "I was terrified; there were seven of them, all men, all enormous. It was very difficult". She speaks slowly, her eyes fixed on a point far away. Marlen talks for forty minutes without interruption while the children, normally an "impossible class" according to their teacher, are motionless; they are dumbfounded.



Children are the true protagonists of tomorrow, Rome, Italy, Claudio Lombardi/ JRS

Unlike their parents, children in school find themselves in more regular contact with non-nationals. Despite this contact, frequent yet superficial, migrants are often seen as a threat and recent media reporting has unfortunately

highlighted an increase in episodes of racism and violence. Ignorance of the causes of migration and the trauma experienced by those living in exile is at the root of this behaviour. It is within this context that the JRS

project *Finestre* (Windows) seeks to raise awareness of forced migration, laying the foundations of a new culture based on welcome and solidarity.

There is no theoretical discussion. The *Finestre* project gives students from the age of 14 the opportunity to listen to refugees. Men and women of various ages and ethnic backgrounds share their experiences of persecution, war and flight to safety. Their accounts are direct evidence of what is happening throughout the world, of events often distorted by mainstream media. The refugee participants describe the dramatic impact of danger on their lives which beforehand were often as normal as ours.

**The refugee participants are the true protagonists of this public awareness project**

Based on the questions asked by the students and the glances they exchange, it is clear that this experience is more striking and thought-provoking than any kind of theoretical explanation. The accounts of their flight – of the months, even years spent on the journey, of the hunger and fear encountered trying to reach Europe – have the greatest impact. Yet, the students are also concerned when they hear of the poverty experienced by refugees in Italy, in part due to a lack of assistance provided by the state. It is a genuine opportunity for the participants to empathise with a refugee in person, maybe even someone of the same age and with similar tastes in music and clothes.

The refugees who agree to talk about their own private experiences in front of a group of strangers are the true protagonists of this project. Despite the language obstacles, awkwardness and the risk of reopening old wounds, they prioritise the importance of portraying this little known reality and of making the integration of future arrivals that much easier. This encounter, which generally lasts a couple of hours, is facilitated by a JRS staff member who seeks to promote a fruitful exchange between citizens and those who, having lost their homeland, are seeking a new one.

**More than 40,000 students have had the possibility of being touched by a refugee**

With the assistance of materials distributed free to all participants by JRS Italy, teachers organise the class beforehand, preparing the students by putting the refugee accounts into context. Thanks to the Ministry of Arts and Culture, JRS has been able to give students the opportunity to widen their knowledge of refugee issues. In 2005, it established the 'Reading does not go into exile' project. An ideal extension of *Finestre*, JRS provides materials and maintains the focus on the encounter between the refugee telling his or her story and the students. Its originality is centred on the objective of giving as much space as possible to refugees to present their experiences within a literary context.



Participants in the *Finestre* school project, Rome, Italy, Claudio Lombardi/ JRS

The participating schools receive a kit of 15 books on exile-related issues, many written in the first person by refugee authors, such as Bertholt Brecht, Isabel Allende, Milan Kundera and Pablo Neruda. Moreover, the Ministry offers schools the opportunity to organise local public meetings with an Italian writer to discuss the issue of exile with students and teachers. The students are invited to enter a writing competition on the issues discussed. Last year's winning essay by 14 year-old Tullia Fidelbo was published on the front page of the national daily, *l'Unità* and subsequently turned into a short film.

Over the last seven years, more than 40,000 students have had the possibility of meeting a refugee and being touched by his or her experience. Constantly bombarded by negative stereotypes about migrants and refugees, the projects open the students' minds to another reality. Convinced of their value as awareness raising exercises, more teachers are interested in participating in these projects. Professor Luigi Narducci, history and philosophy teacher and long-time JRS supporter, is enthusiastic, "...these refugee stories help students to understand the individual human dimension of historic events, their personal responsibility towards the other and the human consequences which every individual choice entails". ♦

## Exercising rights challenges the consequences of xenophobia

Practical training on human rights empowers forcibly displaced persons

Paola Moreno Núñez, JRS Ecuador Assistant Director

Extreme circumstances, such as poverty, frequently condition individual and societal responses to unacknowledged events, such as emigration. This is the case in Ecuador. When the number of Ecuadorians living abroad reached 25 percent of the population, this crisis could no longer be ignored. Unfortunately, this heightened awareness tended to view the emigrant as "the other", living on the margins of society, bordering criminality, in their host countries. With the increase in the presence of immigrants in Ecuador, particularly of forcibly displaced Colombians, these misconceptions have been attributed to the new arrivals.



Building the capacity of the forcibly displaced to defend their rights, Quito, Ecuador/ JRS

Although these prejudices are based on fears of Colombians as inherently violent and potential invaders, they cannot only be explained by the presence of xenophobia. They are also based on a fear of poverty – *aporophobia*. Ecuadorians fear having to compete for scarce resources with other marginalised groups. This fuels prejudice against immigrants, particularly

Colombians. Whether or not *aporophobia* is a form of xenophobia is secondary since an exploration of this issue inevitable leads us to focus on the actors rather than those who experience discrimination.

What is clear is that immigrants and refugees are considered scapegoats for unemployment, criminality, beggary and the

rest of society's unresolved ills. These evils are blindly attributed to the presence of a poorer "other", more excluded than the country's institutionalised indigenous poor. Fears previously directed against poor Ecuadorians have become focused on immigrants and refugees. Ecuadorian society imposes labels on them, such as undocumented persons, foreigners and intrusive paupers. Exacerbated by discrimination, the violation of their rights has become systematic, shaping every aspect of their lives. Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity has become an essential justification for the visceral rejection of immigrants in Ecuador and an excuse for various forms of exploitation.

Consideration of xenophobia from this perspective has shaped the JRS Ecuador response. The team recognised that if immigrants and refugees were to be active defenders of their own rights, they would need assistance in developing tools to exercise those rights and overcome the barriers imposed by discrimination, lack of documentation and exploitation. This view has not deterred JRS from raising awareness of the right to migrate or from engaging with the host population to clarify unfounded fears of immigrants. However, JRS Ecuador saw the need to deal not only with the causes of discrimination, but also with its consequences.

#### **JRS explains to refugee leaders how to report cases of discrimination**

Displaced communities frequently face discrimination when trying to gain access to employment or public services. Once employed, they suffer physical and verbal abuse and are either underpaid or at times not paid at all. When this happens, forcibly displaced persons generally do not have access to legal advice and representation. In many cases, they are unaware of their rights; or organisations or individuals, such as JRS, law professionals and other institutions, are simply too under-resourced to meet their ongoing needs.

Based on the concept of community empowerment, JRS established the School of Human Rights Monitors. JRS recognised that systematic violation of the rights of immigrants and refugees constitutes a huge obstacle to their participation in and integration into local communities, as well as undermining their role as socio-political protagonists. In addition, JRS understands that the exercise of rights is central to the construction of individual citizenship, overcoming the notions of national and non-national on which xenophobia is based.

The school complements the legal work carried out by NGOs, lawyers and state institutions. It offers the leaders of displaced communities a theoretical understanding of their



Working towards a better future, Quito, Ecuador/ JRS

individual and collective human rights and duties. Role play, based on real life situations, is an essential part of the training process which provides participants with the tools which allow them to accompany and defend anyone in their communities whose rights are violated. The school facilitators demonstrate the necessary steps to take when reporting cases of discrimination. As committed community members with direct experience of systematic and ongoing human rights abuses, they are well placed to empathise with and gain the trust of fellow refugees and immigrants.

#### **Community leaders have established an early warning network to prevent more serious abuses**

This accompaniment is not a passive process nor do community leaders wait in their offices for refugees and immigrants to come to them. These men and women continuously engage with community members and monitor what is happening. Aware that only a limited number of human rights abuses can be pursued, they try to ensure that all incidents are recorded. The objective of JRS Ecuador is to put in place the stepping stones for an early warning network. By tracking these incidents, JRS staff hope to prevent the occurrence of more serious abuses. The experience acquired by community leaders will then facilitate the identification of cases which set a legal precedent and the construction of responses to recurrent abuses.

Some of these abuses will be contested in the courts, while others will be pursued at a political and administrative level in cooperation with other civil society groups advocating for change. In this way, the consequences of discrimination and xenophobia are being challenged. ♦

## The media, a powerful opinion former

The role of civil society in the protection of minorities

Gerard Shavatu, JRS South Africa Director

Last May, a series of attacks took place throughout South Africa. Gangs of local black youths descended on informal settlements and shanty towns armed with clubs, machetes and torches, and attacked migrants and refugees, particularly Mozambicans, Malawians and Zimbabweans. In many cities, non-nationals were even attacked on the streets and in their apartments. More than 60 people were killed, several hundred injured and many thousands of victims are now displaced or have returned to their home countries.



The power of the media to play on our fears, Johannesburg, South Africa/ JRS

While South Africa has made remarkable progress since 1994 in establishing a free and democratic society based on respect for the human rights of its own citizens, the situation is not the same for hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees in the country. These people have largely been living on the margins of the society and many scrape by as street traders, while much smaller numbers have managed to earn a living within the formal economy. The economy has struggled to create enough jobs and elements of the national media, and to some extent the pop-

ulation, have blamed foreigners for exacerbating social problems such as rising crime, unemployment and even the spread of diseases.

**The media does not just inform the public, they represent the world to their audiences**

While it would be unfair to accuse media reporting of being the root cause of the violence, continuous publication of negative images of foreigners has no doubt helped to fuel it.

The media does not just inform the public, they represent the world to their audiences. Their processes of news selection – which news is front page, who is interviewed etc – influence this world view. The speed and manner in which the May violence spread throughout the country mirrored the reporting by certain agencies.

The national television (SABC) showed events and images of attacks to such an extent that attackers were able to identify their next target groups. Mobs copied what others were doing in other provinces from the television. Attacking foreigners became the "game" of the day. When some victims of the xenophobic violence stood up for their rights or simply, out of distrust or fear, refused to cooperate with the authorities, several newspapers labelled them "rebels".

The most notorious of the media was the country's largest newspaper, the Daily Sun, with its "South Africa first" focus. Prior to and throughout the period of violence, it referred to migrants and refugees as "aliens". This word carries extremely negative connotations in South Africa as it was used by the apartheid regime to describe foreigners and non-white nationals. However, the coverage did not stop there. It represented the state as having completely failed the population, oversimplifying and distorting the causes of the violence.

The Daily Sun deepened and built further negative connotations into the word "alien" by associating it often with the terms war ("war on aliens"), terror ("the alien terror") and tsunami ("Mugabe's tsunami"). Last April and May, the Daily Sun published more than 20 articles using this type of terminology. It did not blame foreigners for the problems experienced in South African society but it blamed the government for not resolving "the problem". It clearly portrayed foreign nationals as those who benefit from government negligence or direct support. Their "otherness" was identified as the reason why they were being privileged. The newspaper cited the housing and unemployment crisis as the causes of xenophobia, without examining the complexity of these issues. The economic crisis was not explained in terms of a lack of skilled labour or investment. They simply suggested that foreigners benefit from government failure.

The structure of the reporting on the xenophobic attacks and the role of the state was clearly not only biased and



limited but also presented an ideology which condoned xenophobia, and portrayed a state that has completely failed its people. The implication was that if the state has failed, ordinary South Africans are left with no choice but to take the law into their own hands.

#### **NGOs have a role in ensuring that powerful opinion formers do not abuse their position**

In response, a group of two NGOs, the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) and the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) lodged a complaint, endorsed by JRS South Africa, against the Daily Sun concerning its use of the word "aliens" to describe foreigners and incitement to hatred. Initially, the Press Ombudsman, Mr Joe Thloloe, ruled in favour of the Daily Sun. However, after a hearing of the appeal before the Press Appeals Panel, on 22 October, the parties agreed to settle their dispute. The Daily Sun agreed not to use the word "aliens" to describe foreigners and to abide by the Press Code.

While this victory will not force the media to present a more complex analysis of the causes of problems in society, it will constrain its ability to use discriminatory terms to describe minorities. It is clear that civil society organisations have a role to play in ensuring that powerful opinion formers, such as the Daily Sun, do not abuse their position. JRS, unlike many other organisations, accompanies many refugees in vulnerable circumstances. This proximity places an onus on us to ensure that refugee experiences are represented in this important public debate. ♦

## Overcoming discrimination through dialogue

The difficulties of building a community centre

José Luis Fernández, JRS Dominican Republic Communications Officer

In recent years, the level of politically motivated violence in Haiti has dropped considerably. Nevertheless, corruption, human rights abuses and widespread poverty continue to force thousands of Haitians to flee the country in search of protection and brighter economic prospects. Independent observers estimate that close to a million migrants and refugees – 11 percent of the population – have fled to neighbouring Dominican Republic.



Documents are necessary but not enough to create community, Dajabon Dominican Republic, Giovanni Dalmas /JRS

Many are undocumented migrant farmers from the poor northern border area. Northern Haiti is a disaster zone where human smuggling flourishes in the absence of public services and opportunities to undertake legitimate economic activities. Clandestine journeys to the Dominican Republic are organised openly in front of the Haitian authorities without fear of punishment. On the other side of the border, Dominican border guards extort payment from all the Haitians they find in the country including doc-

umented and undocumented migrant workers, market traders and university students. Right-wing sections of Dominican society use this mass migration to generate fear of a Haitian occupation of the country. One group affected by this propaganda is ASOMILIN, a Haitian migrants association.

In 2004, a group of migrant workers came together to discuss experiences of xenophobia in the community. Johnny

Rivas, a father of two and the ASOMILIN coordinator, recalls that at the time, many Haitians did not attend neighbourhood mass services as local people frequently refused to sit beside Haitians and the latter felt unwanted by the Dominicans. Initially, the migrants intended to defend their right to attend mass, or any other socio-cultural activity, as guaranteed by the Dominican constitution.

So they went to church services in the area to speak to other migrants about their experiences. This is where they first entered into contact with JRS. To reach out to the migrant population, JRS Dominican Republic project director Fr Regino began celebrating mass with them in their homes. JRS and ASOMILIN organised meetings on Dominican cultural norms and how Haitians could integrate in their adopted country.

**Many Haitians do not go to local mass services as they feel unwanted by Dominicans**

The two organisations saw the need to build a community centre as a space to raise awareness of migrant rights and duties. However, when they tried to do so in Ranchadero, they were threatened and assaulted by a local group opposed to the presence of Haitians. After this experience, they decided to expand the focus of the centre to offer services to the whole community. Despite the failure in Ranchadero, ASOMILIN and JRS set a new objective of building harmonious, neighbourly and peaceful relationships between both communities. Membership of ASOMILIN expanded throughout the province, reaching 1,500 migrant workers and the group started providing regular workshops on rights, duties and cultural norms.

Spurred on by this success, the migrants endeavoured to build another community centre in nearby Juan Gómez town. Meetings were held with the local community and town council officials. ASOMILIN members even began clearing the site on which the local centre would be built. It was to be a centre for the development of the whole community including migrants and locals, acting as a community centre and a refuge. The centre was to offer workshops, talks and human rights courses for the community and the refuge was intended to be used by the whole population in times of floods, cyclones and storms. ASOMILIN considered the centre as a means to help strengthen community relations and assist in local integration.

Yet again, the migrants were shunned. On 10 February 2008, they arrived in nearby Hato del Medio Arriba to celebrate a mass and were made to leave the town by members of the local community.



Migrant participants in workshops on human rights, northern border, Dominican Republic, José Luis Fernández/ JRS

Mr Rivas recalls that they were told to go back and hold their mass services in Haiti. The same happened when they tried to open the centre in Juan Gómez. They were told that the community did not want the centre in their town. It was the same type of irrational opposition which emerged in Ranchadero. The centre would have also served the local Dominican community, not only migrant workers and their families living on the plantations, Mr Rivas said. Yet, the migrants are determined not to give up so easily. Rivas recognises that migrants need to go even further than just strengthening their relationship with the local community. They need to engage directly with them and their fears.

**The situation will only improve when both communities understand each other better**

ASOMILIN is working with JRS to organise a workshop to see what they can do to make the centre of benefit to the whole population. JRS has contacted all the community organisations in the area and is trying to convince the mayor of Guayubín to lend his support to the event. The migrants understand that this will be a long process. Only when both communities have a better understanding of each other and the difficulties they face, will the situation improve.

Mr Rivas will continue to work to improve relations with Dominicans. The first step is this centre in Juan Gómez. "We cannot go home, so we have to make things better for our families and future generations. It will take time but failure is out of the question", Mr Rivas avowed. ♦

## Servir No. 45

### Struggling against xenophobia: the role of awareness, inclusion, participation and rights Building identities based on human dignity

Articles from Italy, Ecuador, South Africa and the Dominican Republic

## How to help one person

The mission of JRS is to accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees and forcibly displaced people, especially those who are forgotten about and who do not attract international attention. We do this through our projects in over 50 countries worldwide, providing assistance in the form of education, health care, pastoral work, skills training, income-generating activities and many more services to refugees.

JRS relies for the most part on donations from private individuals and development and church agencies.

Here are some examples of how JRS funds are used:

- to provide peace education training to a community leader for one year in Kajo Keji, southern Sudan  
- €20 -
- to advocate on behalf of one refugee for one year in Kakuma camp, Kenya  
- €30 -
- to provide legal protection for one year to a Congolese refugee in Luanda, Angola  
- €30 -
- to give a workshop on human rights to displaced persons in Magdalena Medio, central Colombia  
- €50 -
- to provide a range of social services for one year to a refugee in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
- €350 -
- to assist for one year a separated child seeking asylum in Pretoria, South Africa  
- €500 -

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**Cover Photo** The cloak of xenophobia conceals our common humanity, Ludovico Mascheroni

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