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“Our Table”: Between Activism and Business in Dublin, Ireland

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4.1 Country-Specific Information and Data

In comparison with asylum seekers in other European countries, those in Ireland are in a particularly dire situation. Once they have formally applied for asylum, they enter a system known as Direct Provision (DP), in which they are not allowed to work, are given accommodation and food, but receive very little money (19.10 euros per week in the case of adults, raised to 21.60 euros in August 2017) and are generally forced to remain idle for the duration of the application period, which often lasts more than five years (Conlan 2014).

Since this system was put in place in November 1999 and came to be applied in April 2000, asylum seekers have been lodged in various locations across the country, most of which are privately owned and all of which are privately run (Conlan 2014, 14; Lentin 2012). Left with practically no responsibility for their domestic arrangements and little opportunity to influence these, by the end of 2015, 4696 asylum seekers were distributed across 35 accommodation centers across the Republic, each

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housing between 20 and 530 occupants (Reception and Integration Agency 2016, 25). In cramped conditions, several unrelated individuals, possibly of different cultural backgrounds, typically share a room.

Refugees in DP thus lose control of their lives and, in the absence of access to financial and social capital, find themselves excluded from social participation in the wider society. With very limited funds and no possibility to even prepare their own food, they are administered and stored in these often remote locations for years on end, without access to either education or another form of participation in the social life of Irish society at large. This takes a toll on those affected: After half a year in DP, it is normal for the refugee to have developed mental health problems (Nedeljkovic 2016; Conlan 2014).

Unlike most other EU countries, Ireland has not signed up to the Recast Reception Conditions Directive (RCD, Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013), which stipulates that asylum seekers are to be given access to the labor market no later than nine months after arrival (O'Madagáin 2016, 2). Together with Lithuania and Portugal, Ireland remains the only country in the EU to completely deny labor market access (*ibid.*, 5). The rationale for this stance is the concern that any access to legitimate employment would create an incentive for further migrants to travel to Ireland. In DP, volunteer work therefore provides the only legitimate avenue of engagement for those interned there.

Even after an application for asylum is approved and DP ends, integration into the labor market and the wider community is problematic.

After years of forced idleness, many refugees have experienced a deskilling process, or, in the case of younger asylum seekers, have not been able to make productive use of the time window that would normally be available for tertiary education or vocational training. Refugees therefore often start their lives in Ireland from a position of artificially fostered weakness (Healy et al. 2016, 212 f.).

All of this may change: On May 30, 2017, the Irish Supreme Court ruled that it is unlawful to prevent asylum seekers from working. However, this recent ruling, which has uncertain consequences, has had no impact on the events covered in this study.

4.2 Personal History of Reasons for Leaving One’s Home Country

Ellie Kisyombe was born in Malawi, where her family was active in both politics and agro-business. Her father was an academic, and her mother ran an agricultural business that cooperated with multinationals and was part of international supply chains, providing her daughter with exposure to entrepreneurship at an early age. Several relatives held parliamentary and ministerial positions at various times.

Ellie was sent to study at Bristol University in the UK, but did not graduate, having interrupted her studies following the death of her father in the early 2000s, and returned to Malawi.

Back home, she became active in opposition politics, joining a group of activists that was affiliated with Rafiq Hajat, a prominent Malawian opposition figure. However, by late 2010, the political environment had gotten more repressive, and Hajat advised the activists that worked with him to leave the country, which she proceeded to do.¹

4.3 Personal Reasons for and Circumstances of Traveling to the Specific Host Country

From Malawi, Ellie first went to Kenya, but found that she could not remain there. So after a brief return to Malawi, she relocated to Ireland in early 2011. This was not a straightforward decision.

Her destination of choice would normally have been the UK, which she knew from her studies. However, while it proved impossible for her to obtain a UK visa, Ireland was one of the few countries with visa-free travel for Malawians.

The easy access to the Republic of Ireland meant a rather smooth transition to the destination country, which was reached by plane. Ellie requested asylum upon arrival at Dublin International Airport and immediately entered the DP system.

In early 2017, the Irish national radio channel RTE 1 released a fictionalized audio drama, in which Ellie voices the part of an African woman leaving her country in exactly this way (Brew 2017).

Ellie originally travelled to Ireland on her own, but eventually her daughter and son joined her in Ireland.

4.4 Business Data and History of Establishing Businesses

Ellie Kisiyombe is one of the founders of a pop-up café known as Our Table. From August 2016 to March 2017, it was registered as a company limited by guarantee under the name Our Table Dublin (OTD) and in November 2017, it was reregistered, with the same status, as Failte Our Table. Her path into entrepreneurship arose from her involvement in refugee activism and remains bound up with it.

Like many other asylum seekers entering the Republic, Ellie was unprepared for what awaited her and, in particular, for the strictures of the Direct Provision system. In this situation, activism ultimately provided a coping mechanism:

Once in Ireland, I applied for asylum and entered Direct Provision, which came as a shock for me, and for about a year, did not do very much, and was moved around several times. However, in late 2012, the Irish Refugee Council was looking for interns for a campaign, and they chose me and another refugee, Steven, to work there. We participated in the massive protest against Direct Provision in 2014, which ultimately failed, but it had gotten me involved in activism. After that, I just kept going, working with other asylum seekers to create several communal gardens, going to schools to talk about my experience in Direct Provision, and generally just turning up. (Interview with Ellie Kisiyombe, Dublin, May 5, 2017)

Faced with the same negative circumstances as numerous other asylum seekers in DP, Ellie nevertheless developed considerably more agency than most and became an avid and articulate campaigner against the DP system.

As a result of her activism and involvement with the non-profit startup that arose from it, she has become a media personality in Ireland and a household name within the refugee and activist communities.²

As a social enterprise with multiple stakeholders, OTD was the consequence of an encounter between Ellie Kisyombe and Michelle Darmody, an Irish artist, author and café owner, in 2015. Both women had a strong interest in food, cooking and refugee activism, and their activities developed rapidly from informal meetings with asylum seekers and their supporters, into a registered company.

Michelle Darmody, the Irish partner in the venture, had long been active in the hospitality business before learning about the situation of refugees in Ireland.

After returning to Ireland in the mid-2000s, she established first the Cake Café in South Dublin in 2006 and a second café in the north of the city in 2012 (Darmody 2016).

Starting in late 2015, Michelle Darmody and Ellie began to organize informal social meetings, at which asylum seekers, their friends and supporters cooked and ate together at what was occasionally referred to as the DP Café. Initially, this began to take place at a cultural center where Darmody had been able to secure a kitchen for the group.

In early 2016, these meetings developed into a pop-up café that was made accessible to the wider public when the opportunity presented itself. Without premises of their own, which were unaffordable in the expensive Dublin real estate market, the activities of the café have thus been constrained by the availability of suitable spaces.

In February 2016, a Facebook page appeared that announced the café's first major pop-up, a two-day event at a cultural event space in Dublin, the Project Arts Center (PAC), where the café was open from 12 to 3 pm on two successive afternoons, April 5 and 6, 2016. Further engagements followed at the Streetfeast (www.streetfeast.ie), on the premises of the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, which is also a cultural institution, on June 12 2016 and at the Irish Museum of Modern Art on August 15 of that year.

Previously an informal forum, in September 2016, Our Table Dublin was registered at the Company Registration Office (CRO) as a company limited by guarantee (CLG), a nonprofit, in order to "raise public awareness of the injustices of the Direct Provision system currently in operation in Ireland and to gain political support to end Direct Provision and to process all applications for political asylum in a timely and humane

manner” (Our Table Dublin 2016), with a view to establishing a restaurant and training center for current and former asylum seekers to support their integration into working life. This restaurant was to become “self-supporting and self-sustaining after an initial set-up period” and would be “a warm, welcoming and inclusive restaurant offering international cuisine and a celebration of cooking to the general public which will generate revenue in order to create employment and sustain an information/training center” (ibid.). Michelle Darmody and Ellie Kisyombe were listed as directors of the company, with the PAC, a cultural venue in Dublin’s Temple Bar area, specified as its base of operations (Our Table Dublin 2016), and the Dublin address of its company secretary, Marie Redmond, as its seat.

The Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) is the preferred legal structure for diverse types of nonprofits, ranging from housing associations to large NGOs. While these typically have multiple members and hold an annual general meeting (AGM) that elects the board, Our Table Dublin made use of the option to have only a single member, Ellie Kisyombe, who, as an asylum seeker unable to work in Ireland, thus held ultimate control of the venture.

Incorporation had become necessary, as the prospect of a more enduring presence at the PAC made it necessary to engage in regular commercial transactions and to formally employ staff.

Funding for OTD was obtained through the FundIt crowdfunding platform, which raised 11,465 euros, or 114% of the funding target of 10,000 euros, from 179 funders (FundIt 2016). In addition, the café reportedly generated an additional 10,000 euros during its two months of operation at the PAC.

Between October and mid-December 2016, Our Table Dublin was open for business in Temple Bar, Dublin, garnering significant public interest. A website, www.ourtable.ie, and a twitter account, @ourtabledublin, were set up as well. In addition to social media, mainstream media, including print, radio and TV stations, provided additional coverage.³ For its activist funders and supporters, this was an important step in making the venture and the issue of Direct Provision better known to a wider public.

The day-to-day management of the café was split between two individuals, who held paid part-time positions: South African Lucky Khambule had just been recognized as a refugee after more than three years in Direct Provision and was thus in a position to manage the café without facing the restrictions on employment to which asylum seekers within the DP system are subject. Khambule shared this responsibility with Elena Moreo, a yoga teacher formerly employed as a researcher on migration at Trinity College, who had extensive gastronomic experience.

They managed a team of refugee employees, who were recruited from the refugee community. Although they were all recognized asylum seekers and thus had the right to work, many had not been in paid employment for extended periods. For a number of them, this constituted their first job interview in a long time and led to their first formal paid employment in Ireland.

There were two limiting factors for the PAC experience: The space for the café was only available before 5 pm, which meant that café activities had to come to an end by 4 pm, and it did not have a kitchen. This made it necessary to source foods from outside, which could otherwise have been prepared onsite, and limited the range of possible culinary offerings largely to salads, sweets and drinks. As a result of these factors, the venture was not profitable over the PAC pop-up period, in spite of significant sales volumes, and used up a significant share of the crowdfunding obtained during its period of activity.

In spite of its success with the general public and the media, the activities of the venture came to a preliminary end before Christmas 2016, when the café closed and an alternative venue could not be immediately found.

A personal outcome for Ellie was an invitation to attend a cooking course at a prestigious cooking school in Ballymaloe, County Cork, run by Darina Allen, whose courses are a recognized qualification for chefs in Ireland. While this further training could, in due course, be put to good use for the project, it also removed Kisyombe from Dublin for a four-month period starting in early 2017. After the successful two-month run at the PAC, there was little activity over the following months.

The willingness of the other board members to continue their role proved limited. On February 17, the directors of Our Table Dublin requested that the company be struck off the company register, since it had ceased trading. This step, driven by the Irish officers of the company, was realized one month later on March 17, 2017.

After returning to Dublin from Ballymaloe in May 2017, Ellie worked on the restoration of the company. In the summer of 2017, she was in the process of reregistering OTD, but this actually led to the establishment of a new company, Failte Our Table, in November 2017. In this intermediate period, small-scale popups occurred, but in the absence of a business license, food and beverage sales were not possible and only donations could be received.

The network on which it is based has, however, been significantly reconfigured. In reestablishing the company, Ellie relied on considerable logistical support from the Irish Refugee Council and help from the wider business community, which was provided on a pro-bono basis. Significantly, all the directors are now Africans who have gone through the DP system.

4.5 Individual Enablers and Constraints

Ellie's early exposure to both entrepreneurship and politics in her family in Malawi may have contributed to the mindset that has allowed her to become an entrepreneur, as did her history of activism in her country of origin. In Ireland, this resulted in a high level of activist engagement in the face of adversity, and her strong links to the activist community put her in a position to make use of the opportunity that presented itself in mid-2016 to become one of the founders of the Our Table Dublin project.

A consummate networker, she has a knack for making and maintaining contacts, which has allowed her to make use of the skills and knowledge present in her network to fill gaps in her own abilities. In particular, she acts as a gatekeeper and an interface between asylum seekers in Ireland, the activist community and society at large.

In her activities, she can rely on consummate public relations (PR) skills, which manifest themselves both in her social media presence, particularly on Facebook, and in the wide-ranging media exposure that has made her the asylum seeker most present in the Irish public sphere. Radiating joy and confidence, Ellie is someone that people want to be around, and she manages to project that image in the media as well.

While she did not have previous experience as an entrepreneur, she did have an affinity for the food industry thanks to her mother's entrepreneurial experience as a food producer. Furthermore, in the course of her entrepreneurial journey with Our Table Dublin, she managed to acquire specific culinary skills, being admitted to one of the most prestigious cooking schools in the country.

At the same time, Ellie has only limited experience in formal business contexts in Ireland, and her status as an asylum seeker did not allow her to gather such skills shortly after arrival, with the only legitimate legal status she could occupy being that of a volunteer. She has, however, been able to compensate for this by relying on her networks, which have come to include professional services firms that agreed to do pro-bono work for a nonprofit such as Our Table. The requirement to have outside help for procedures, such as business registration, has, however, meant that some steps took a long time to accomplish, including the reregistration of Our Table in 2017.

4.6 Community Enablers and Constraints

While many migrant entrepreneurs make use of ethnic and kinship networks in order to establish a market for their product, this has not been the case here: Specifically Malawian networks do not appear to have played a role in Ellie's business, nor have family members. Rather, her ability to coordinate commercial activity has largely been due to her ability to tap into a number of discrete networks for support and act as a gatekeeper between them. Some of these networks have been present constantly, while others have been reconfigured.

One network she did not choose, but was thrust into, is that of the asylum seekers in Ireland, whom she met when entering Direct Provision.

These asylum seekers and the newly recognized refugees who had graduated from this network formed most of the workforce in her project and, to the extent that they had left Direct Provision, were prime candidates for formal employment, while asylum seekers remaining in DP could participate as volunteers. Servers and cooks, for whom participation in the project provided a rare gateway into the world of work, were largely recruited from this pool.

The second network consisted of refugee activists, whom Ellie met over the years as she herself became a well-known activist. There was some overlap with the refugee network, in that some asylum seekers became also activists, but it also comprised members of the Irish public. From the interviews conducted and analysis of the media coverage, it emerged that there were as many as three significant Irish support networks that Ellie tapped into:

- The group of long-standing activists who were organized in NGOs such as the Irish Refugee Council, which had been a vehicle of Ellie's socialization into activism in Ireland from 2012 onward.
- A group of high-status, professional Irish women, who constituted a friendship network of their own and were strongly involved between late 2015 and early 2017. These women became involved after Ellie's meeting with Michelle Darmody in 2015 and contributed significant resources to the establishment of Our Table Dublin as a formal business in the summer of 2016. These businesswomen, academics and administrators had a strong sense that something needed to be done about the plight of asylum seekers in Ireland, but their involvement with this type of activism might be of lesser duration than that of the first group. As Ellie stated, they were brought in by Michelle Darmody and were primarily her friends. They supervised the venture and its finances between the summer of 2016 and the end of that year. After the deregistration of OTD in early 2017, in which they were the driving force, these individuals ceased to be active in the project, and they did not have a role in the reregistration of the venture as Failte Our Table in late 2017.

- There were then a number of individuals who contributed significantly, but did not have a long and sustained involvement with the project. This includes a significant number of journalists and media personalities who associated themselves with the project in late 2016, which led, among other things, to the production of two RTE1 radio programs involving Ellie and her colleagues. Similarly, Dareena Allen’s decision to accept Ellie to her cooking school in Ballymaloe on a pro-bono basis provided valuable training in gastronomy. However, while they impacted the development of the project, these individuals were only involved with it from time to time and did not have the sustained participation of the first two networks.

In addition, social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, as well as a dedicated website, provided PR channels and created virtual communities, including many members of the three aforementioned groups. The crowdfunding effort for OTD, which raised more than 11,000 euros in 2016, is another example of such an ad-hoc online community.

As a networked enterprise, Ellie’s venture has thus depended on the participation of different communities to a significant degree. At the same time, this has required considerable stakeholder management skills on her part and appears to have led to occasional disruptions, in particular at the interface between the refugee network that provided most of the actual workforce and the dominant individual Irish partners during the 2016 pop-up at the PAC.

A business built on volunteer networks thus has significant potential to activate resources and involve individuals far beyond its core constituency. At the same time, it faces the constant challenge of maintaining momentum and retaining a pool of supporters and partners that allow it to remain sustainable.

4.7 Institutional Enablers and Constraints

Among the institutional constraints, the most obvious is Ellie’s status as an asylum seeker without the right to work and subject to the constraints of the Direct Provision system. This means that most of the typical entrepre-

neurship formats, such as the for-profit limited company or a proprietorship, are not available to her, and the non-profit company limited by guarantee currently constitutes the only option for legal entrepreneurship.

Ellie has thus received no direct support from the Irish state for her project. She has, however, the constant support of the Irish Refugee Council, an NGO that receives part of its funding from the Irish state.

Support for Our Table has involved numerous established media outlets, including print, audio and audio-visual media, but this support has arisen as the result of individual, network-based contacts and is not based on an established institutional framework.

At the same time, the non-profit status of the enterprise has made it easier for OTD to receive contributions in kind, donations and the free PR that results from extensive and sympathetic media coverage. This has enabled it to thrive, but also subjected it to a certain instability, with numerous individuals floating in and out of its orbit, unfettered by the contractual constraints that normally bind individuals, corporate partners and other stakeholders to an enterprise.

4.8 Methodological Considerations

As a networked social enterprise without permanent premises, Our Table has not been an easy business to observe, particularly given that at the time this study was first undertaken, following on deregistration in early 2017, it had been dormant for a number of months, and Ellie herself was not in Dublin. It thus became necessary to reconstruct its history on the basis of multiple semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, who contributed different perspectives on the development of the company. While Ellie Kisiyombe herself was very generous with her time, other key individuals were only interviewed once. In spite of sustained efforts on the part of the author, an interview with Michelle Darmody could not be arranged, and the sub-network of which she was the focal point is under-represented in the pool of interviewees.

While the main event, the PAC popup, preceded the study period, some of the preparatory meetings concerning the reregistration of the company could be observed, as were some small-scale popups.

A constant theme in the research was the relationship between activism and entrepreneurship, with the commercial viability of Our Table having to be balanced constantly with the demands of activism, which was the dominant motivation for most of those involved in the project. This led to some decisions that might compromise viability, such as a strong reliance on an untested refugee workforce. While OTD was not commercially successful, spending most of its crowdfunded resources in less than three months of activity in late 2016, its significant PR impact and active integration of refugees made it a highly successful activist project that opened up further support from different quarters.

As the newly reregistered venture goes into its next iteration, Failte Our Table, as it is now called, is likely to retain a fluid, network-based structure for the immediate future. Watch this space—end Direct Provision!

Notes

1. All information in this section is exclusively gained from interviews with Ellie Kisyombe.
2. Coverage in the Irish media included several articles in the Irish Times, as well as repeated coverage in the Irish Examiner. The RTE 1 radio channel produced a program with her, Brew (2016).
3. The official Irish radio station RTE Radio One produced two features with Ellie Kisyombe over the period. One, “In the Wings—Our Table”, is a feature portraying the project, with extensive input by both of its directors (Brew 2016). The other, “Flight Risk”, is a dramatized account of one refugee’s plane journey to Ireland and to safety, with Ellie Kisyombe voicing the part of the main female protagonist (Brew 2017). RTE also produced a report on the opening of the café in November (Madden 2016), as well as broadcasting an appeal for new premises on December 12, 2016.

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