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AN INNOVATIVE MIGRANT political integration scheme which sees migrants placed with TDs for a six month internship in Leinster House has shown how important it is for the government to connect with migrants, and vice versa.



Leandro Neumann Ciuffo

Image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/leandrociuffo/6178582279/in/photostream/>

First piloted in January 2012, the 'Opening Power to Diversity' scheme has been given the green light by the Oireachtas for a second round of placements.

The EU-funded initiative, devised by Crosscare Migrant Project, is designed to engender increased integration of migrants in the Irish political system.

"We want people firstly to get a unique first-hand experience of what life for an Irish politician is like" said Crosscare Policy Officer, Joe O'Brien.

We also want people to be inspired and feel that politics is now something that they can get involved in. Our migrants and new Irish citizens have come to Ireland with energy, fresh ideas and different perspectives – these are things that politics in Ireland needs.

The scheme was granted four places in its pilot phase. This time, six places have been allocated and the new interns are now almost two months into their placement.

Adaku Ezeudo

Adaku Ezeudo, originally from Nigeria, was one of the four interns participating in the first round of placements. Speaking to *TheJournal.ie* about her six month placement with Fine Gael TD Derek Keating, she said: "I was very interested in an opportunity to get to know the way the Irish political system actually works."

Ezeudo once worked in the corporate sector but then moved onto community work, and is currently the coordinator for a migrant women's group.

Ezeudo said that "coming from Africa, we would have this negative view of politicians" and she wanted to see what the case was in Ireland. "One thing I noticed about the government and the politics was people had a right, a voice. That was what surprised me-

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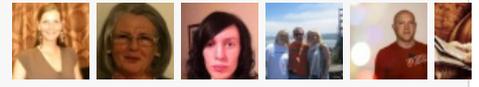
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that people could walk up to the Dáil and protest.

“In Africa you don’t really have that direct contact – they are all surrounded in security.” Initially, Ezeudo thought Irish politicians were all good people – “they are angels, they have no sin” – but then realised this wasn’t the case when the Celtic Tiger collapsed.

When Ezeudo was working in Leinster House, she was surprised by the questions that were asked of her, such as people asking when was she going home and not realising she was an Irish citizen.

“I could imagine the perception they have of migrants. They don’t understand us. I don’t think our voices are heard,” she said, pointing out that migrants are not represented in the government.

🗣️ Maybe our voices will be heard tomorrow. I don’t think our voices are really heard as clearly – they know we are screaming and shouting. They don’t really hear what we are saying.

She pointed out that migrant women, for example, can have “double or triple the disadvantage” compared to Irish women. But, she adds: “I was very moved with all the things I learned from people I spoke to. I would have ordinarily assumed issues migrants face are peculiar to migrants and no Irish people are going through the same thing.”

However, she discovered this wasn’t the case. “It was surprising for me. It was a really interesting experience, a very eye-opening experience.” She said she gained confidence when dealing with political figures, and discovered how hard-working politicians are – but that they can ‘have the craic’ as well.

Some migrants have never heard of Leinster House, Ezeudo added, or who (or what) the Taoiseach is. She describes the internship as a “once in a lifetime opportunity”. Now, she realises that people “can be involved in the change process” and that it is about people learning from each other – migrants and political figures.

She undertook constituency work, admin work, writing up parliamentary questions and press releases during her internship. After her experiences, Ezeudo might even seek a career in politics – perhaps not in the frontline just yet, but she is not ruling that out in the future.

Evans Shirihuru

Evans Shirihuru, who was matched with independent TD Maureen O’Sullivan, came to Ireland 2007 from the UK, and is originally from Zimbabwe.

When he saw the opportunity to go for the internship, he jumped at the chance. “The thing is, I’m somebody who is interested in politics. I love politics, and I am somebody who is interested in journalism.”

🗣️ But I don’t sometimes believe in the things I read or see on TV. I wanted to come up close to it. I wanted to know that so I could see for myself. Also, coming from Zimbabwe... it is not that clear and transparent [in politics there]. I wanted to compare our political system with where I come from.

What did he think after the internship was over? Shirihuru sees what is being done, but also sees that “there is probably much more to be done”. From reading and listening to people’s stories, he can see that Ireland is an intercultural society,” and I think because of that there is something the political system is trying to catch up on”.

“It is going to take more time compared to other countries,” he said, maybe even 40 - 50 years. “There is quite a little bit more to be done,” he said, but he can see it gradually happening.

This integration scheme, he said, could “mean a lot to people”, and would “probably open



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their eyes". "I think the scheme is quite important and should be extended to a lot more people."

According to the 2011 census, 12 per cent of the population are now non-Irish. This figure has jumped 143 per cent since 2002. Despite significant growth in the numbers of non-Irish nationals resident in Ireland, migrants continue to be almost completely unrepresented in the Dáil. In the 2011 General Election, approximately 3 of the 564 people who ran for the 166 seats were naturalised Irish citizens.

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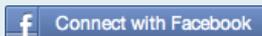


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