



Dublin City Community Cooperative, Register Number 5628 R, Registered Charity Number (RCN) 20107079, Unit 1
Killarney Court, Buckingham Street, Dublin 1

An exploration into the volunteering
experiences of people in direct
provision; a composition of three
stories and the reflections of an
advocacy/caseworker

Author

Sofia Clifford-Riordan

Dublin City Community Co-op Policy, Advocacy & Programmes Officer

Introduction

As the title states, this piece is composed of three stories, focused on the theme of volunteering. This theme is explored through the stories of three people and the reflections of the author. Donald Schön, a philosopher and urban planner, developed a theory of reflection in his book, *The Reflective Practitioner*. He delineates a two-pronged process of reflection applicable to practitioners in a variety of fields. A key component of this reflective process is to examine how one's positionality within a given profession permeates and potentially enhances one's understanding of a phenomenon. This approach to enquiry has been applied by the author who works both as a caseworker with international protection applicants and advocacy officer for Dublin City Community Co-operative.¹ One of the key aims of Schön's process is to facilitate professional development by generating learning from experience; this was not a priority for the piece given its focus on the individual stories but rather a by-product.

Initial, organic curiosity and feelings arise from a new experience/realization; reflection-in-action is the internal dialogue that these inspire, leading to a desire to generate greater understanding of the phenomenon experienced (Niblock, 2007). Despite major obstacles facing international protection applicants in terms of material conditions, ineligibility to access employment and the majority of training and educational courses, the author found an eagerness amongst these communities to participate in Irish society in alternative ways, with many enquiring about volunteering opportunities. This intriguing realization sparked the question of how to best understand the phenomenon experienced, what sources to seek and methods to utilize.

This developed into a meeting with the Dublin City Volunteer Centre (DCVC) which is one branch of the national network of volunteer centers that links prospective volunteers to organizations looking for volunteers. Kristin Kristjansdottir, the Social Inclusion and Volunteer Engagement Officer with DCVC, confirmed that the interest observed by the author amongst international protection applicants in volunteering was representative of a wider phenomenon.

This small project was initiated as a way of hearing some of the stories behind this phenomenon, to build an understanding of international protection applicants' motivations for engaging in volunteer work and their experience of doing so. It is based on interviews with Salami, Mhammed and Musa, all of whom are volunteers with the Dublin City Volunteer Centre and an interview with Kristin, introduced above. During the interviews and the process of transcribing and writing about the stories, the author engaged in the second dimension of Schön's reflective framework: reflection-on-action, meaning reflection after the event, in this case the research process. This involved in-depth contemplation into the interview material and the ways in which the stories embodied concepts such as belonging, connection and integration, that are often vague and abstract. Core to reflective writing is analysis of experience, asking the why questions while informed by the context in which the experience is embedded. The author draws on their experience of working with international protection applicants in the Irish context where the promotion of belonging, connection and integration amongst international protection applicant communities are sought after but not always necessarily understood nor methods of achieving them teased out. Through describing the stories of

¹ www.dublincitycommunitycoop.ie

Salami, Mhammed and Musa and reflecting upon them, this piece reinvigorates these concepts with meaning and perhaps presents a path forward where volunteering plays a more central, recognized, and purposeful role in the integration of international protection applicants.

When Kristin was asked why she thinks people volunteer, she explained that many people had been involved in volunteering in their own countries and that it was “already a part of their culture, personality and vision for their lives”. This rang true with Salami, Mhammed and Musa. Each story begins with a description of their earlier voluntary pursuits followed by how they have continued this practice in Ireland. The author’s reflections on how their stories breathe life into the concepts articulated above are weaved throughout.

Salami’s story



Salami was brought up in a tradition of giving her time and energy for the benefit of others. She fondly reminisces on how, as the baby of the family, her mother took her everywhere. “She really loved to be with me” Salami recalls as she describes volunteering in the Church every week. Together, they would clean the church, sweeping, mopping, and arranging the chairs, before and after Sunday service. Salami’s description of her mother conjures up an image of a diligent and resilient woman, a pillar within her family and community. “She motivates me” Salami states, after describing how her mother worked hard to always keep the house tidy, something Salami internalized as a child.

“She is late now” says Salami referring to her mother’s passing, but it becomes clear throughout the interview that her mother’s spirit continues to inspire her every day. Another person from home whom Salami spoke of lovingly was her close friend. When this friend sadly lost her life ten years ago, she left

behind two sons and one daughter. Faced with this bereavement, Salami brought forth her values of courageous compassion and care, taking the three children in and raising them as her own. They are all now young adults and attending university, Salami tells me, her demeanor imbued with equal measures of pride and pathos.

Salami came to Ireland from Nigeria in December 2022. Her and her three sons now live in Direct Provision together. She proudly speaks of how pristinely she keeps their room, not waiting for anybody else to empty the bin, clean the toilets or do the laundry. “Ask and they will say, that is Salami” she states referring to the other people living in the center.

In a system such as direct provision where opportunities to invoke one’s independence is deprived, keeping one’s space clean and orderly is a valiant act of agency.

Salami’s respect for her environment reflects her caring nature. For it is not just the room that she strives to keep clean; she earnestly attends two separate canal cleanups regularly which the Dublin City Volunteer Centre referred her to. Salami brings her three boys along to the canal clean ups and they love it. She wants them to learn the value of helping the community, seeing oneself not as “yourself alone” and doing what one is capable of for the collectivity. Salami embodies the example of her mother through actions underpinned by a sense of duty towards others and the environment; a value which she transmits to her own children. She also loves to meet new people at the clean-ups,

many of whom hail from all corners of the globe. Our conversation enables me to perceive how the expression of this sense of duty, through activities such as volunteering, fosters the development of connection to one's neighbors and environment. In a world that feels increasingly individualistic, the care and concern that Salami expresses for her new community is inspiring.

The role of volunteering in fostering connection is further highlighted when Salami describes her experience in the St Vincent de Paul charity shop where she does two four-hour shifts per week. She always makes sure to set her alarm for her shifts the night before, as they are something she looks forward to. Salami speaks highly of the manager there, expressing that she is very lovely and accommodating. She also takes great joy in helping customers, seeing her role in the charity shop as yet another way to meet new people, understand the community and to give back.

When I asked Salami if there was anything else she would like to add, she said that she appreciates Ireland for giving her this opportunity.

Mhammed's Story



Like Salami, Mhammed too had engaged in altruistic pursuits prior to his arrival in Ireland.

While at home in Morocco, Mhammed crossed paths with a music teacher who was passing through his city. He took the opportunity and asked if they could provide some classes for him and a friend. As their classes progressed, Mhammed was struck with an idea, "we should be spreading the hobby between the young people" he says. From this idea, Mhammed began a music association, acting as its treasurer, to provide the young people in the area with an opportunity to express themselves creatively. While providing opportunities to learn music was of course an end in and of itself, it also acted as a means through which to impart guidance to the youth. Mhammed saw this activity as a way of steering the younger

generation away from drugs and alcohol, to inspire them to work hard in school so that they could "get a respectable job, to help their family". He aspired to contribute to the personal development of young people with an understanding of how personal development is inextricably linked to community development and prosperity.

He described how he was determined to keep the music association independent, free from ties to political figures and parties. The association was offered support from political figures, but he resolved to maintain the association as a civilian activity. The association would not be used as a tool to promote the agenda, influence, or status of political actors. Mhammed wanted to ensure that the participation and involvement of the of young people was conserved, and not just "at voting time".

When Mhammed arrived in Ireland, volunteering was a natural undertaking to continue contributing to the welfare of his new community. Mhammed states that he volunteers to "be helpful to the community and vulnerable people and contribute to the society in the limits of what [he] can do".

Mhammed observes how many of the people he lives with in the direct provision center have little to no English. Already living in conditions which demarcate them from mainstream Irish society, the lack

of English language has a profoundly isolating affect. Mhammed describes how people can withdraw, staying inside the center, inevitably eroding their wellbeing. Being a proficient English speaker himself, Mhammed began to volunteer in the cross-cultural classes ran by a voluntary group in his center on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. In these classes participants are divided and sat at tables according to their language ability. Each has a volunteer tutor that teaches English through a conversational style. Mhammed states that the lessons are popular, with around 100 people participating. He adapts his lessons depending on the level of his group. He describes how he structures his lessons with the first half dedicated to pronunciation, the alphabet, numbers, and greetings, and the second half focused on vocabulary in a variety of topics such as leisure and sport. Mhammed says that he wants “to help people to integrate”. As with the music association, Mhammed sees the development of English language as a goal in and of itself, but also as a means to another goal: the integration of his new friends and neighbors into Irish society.

Volunteering is also playing a role in Mhammed’s own integration. Through the Dublin City Volunteer Centre Mhammed secured a volunteering position at the St Patrick’s Day celebration held in Collin’s Barricks. He really enjoyed the experience, stating that he liked the traditional Irish music being played very much. He has equal admiration for Irish history and language, noting that they are amongst the oldest in Europe. His participation in this festival provided an opportunity to learn more about the story behind St Patrick’s day and to connect with Irish people, who he said are his favorite population in the world next to the Scottish. Mhammed describes the Irish as friendly, happy people, receptive to the integration of new communities.

Through the Dublin City Volunteer Centre, Mhammed has also been working in a charity shop in Ringsend. Like Salami, Mhammed values this role as an opportunity to meet new people, other volunteers, and members of the community alike. He fondly remembers the day of the rugby match England vs Ireland. Mhammed stayed behind after his shift to watch the match in the staff room of the charity shop with other volunteers from France, the USA and Ireland. “I forgot myself there” he says as he describes being sat amongst his new friends. He says that he now has Irish friends from the west of Ireland. “Maybe if I need to know something in the Gaelic language, I can ask them” he says, reflecting his keenness to immerse himself in Irish culture.

Mhammed is also involved in volunteering with the Jesuit Refugee Service and with a local community garden. Throughout the interview he states that he is an active person and that he likes to keep busy, which is clear from his extensive portfolio of volunteering jobs. Mhammed has not yet gotten his work permit and he will not be entitled to one until he is in the country at least 6 months. Mhammed recognizes that volunteering provides him with something meaningful to fill his day, stating that without something to do “the daytime is a disaster”.

The conversation with Mhammed illuminates facets of human nature and our fundamental needs; people flourish when they are active, fulfilling a role and a purpose in society that serves the common good. As an international protection applicant, one’s ability to do so is curtailed. Volunteering provides an invaluable opportunity for people to overcome some of the most detrimental limitations of the direct provision system by facilitating agency and providing opportunities to help others, consequently enabling connection and the process of integration.

Musa's Story



Like Salami and Mhammed, Musa also engaged in volunteer work prior to his arrival in Ireland. In Kenya, he described the dangers that mosquitos posed to the health of people in his community, children and pregnant women being particularly at risk. He volunteered, handing out nets and promulgating simple preventative measures that households could take such as clearing bushes around the home and clearing stagnant waters where mosquitos lay eggs. There was a “tremendous improvement” in terms of malaria, Musa tells me.

He also worked as a community volunteer for an initiative which aimed to improve the health of pregnant women. Community volunteers like Musa would visit these women and encourage health promoting activities such as visiting the clinic for checkups and the administration of iron tablets.

Although Musa was ultimately compelled to leave his village in Kenya, he speaks tenderly of his community and their way of life. “There is no separate dinner” he explains, “everyone eats from the same plate”, which creates strong bonds between people. He says that there are “very close relationships in Africa, you hold hands with your friends”. Sitting beside someone on the bus, “you can put your head on them, have a chat”. He contrasts this with his bus journey into town to meet me; he was conscious to keep the space between him and the person beside him. He has learned that Ireland is a different culture; people are in their own bubble, running around, busy and operating in their own zone, as Musa puts it. This sense of connection to the collectivity is something that he misses a lot.

Our conversation progresses to his role volunteering in a charity shop on Aungier Street, secured through the Dublin City Volunteer Centre, which he describes as “a wonderful job”. Musa outlines his various tasks in the charity shop, ironing the clothes, arranging them, packing them, and putting price tags on them. But it becomes clear that his passion for the role emanates from the connections it fosters rather than the daily duties. He describes all the people he’s met through this job, Germans, French, Romanians, and Irish locals. “When someone comes into the shop it doesn’t matter whether they buy something... they are looking at the clothes, chatting with you... these small conversations are wonderful” he expresses, noting that he loves the older people that come to chat. His manner conveys a sincere and earnest gratitude for these moments. I ask whether he thinks volunteering has acted as a means to fulfil the loss of connection he experienced when he left his home and the collective culture in Kenya. Musa agrees, saying “volunteering is compensating my lifestyle from back home, having that kind of community, I never thought about it like that but when you ask that question, I think yes”.

It is clear that Musa cares deeply about the collectivity and derives joy from helping others. In Kenya, people look after one another; volunteering gives him this in a different way. The conversation with Musa inspires an understanding of what it means to live a fulfilled life. Connection is not just about being around people, it’s truly caring for others, making efforts to enhance their happiness, expending effort in the absence of necessity. “You do not have to do it, but you still do it... means that your heart really loves it... you do it just because it is good, and it is right” he says referring to

volunteer work. He describes how these acts of service nurture one's own wellbeing "volunteering is helping me inside" he says, "if you do one thing for a person it is the best feeling you can have".



Like Salami, Musa also expresses his care for the collectivity and community through canal clean-ups. He engages in similar activities such as beach clean-ups and tidy towns. The first volunteering role he had was with Swords tidy towns where he met with the group every weekend to collect litter, remove graffiti and clean road signs, "small things but wonderful things" he says. Musa affirms that cleaning the canal or the streets can have a huge impact. He loves everything to do with the environment and hence rejoices in volunteer work outside. His love for the environment has been embedded since childhood. He describes how sustainable practices and values were taught by his ancestors. "My tribe has this culture, if you are working on a road, make sure that you work where someone has already created a path – don't work on a different road because you will destroy nature" he tells me.

When building houses, they only cut down a tree that will regrow, they only kill an animal if they know they will eat it. They live side by side with livestock and wild animals. His ancestors knew of the importance of nature and living in harmony with it. Through his volunteer work in Dublin, he has been able to continue caring for the environment; he is far away from Kenya but the wisdom that was transmitted to him is perpetuated through his values and their new avenues of expression.

Like Salami and Mhammed, Musa has great appreciation for the Irish people and the Irish government, but he does touch on the tribulations of direct provision. He describes it as being in a cocoon, surrounded by restriction. He cannot work, he lives in a hotel where the lights must go off at regimented times, he must wait until certain times to eat as the basic ability to cook a meal for oneself is a prerogative not afforded to him or anyone else in the system. "As an asylum seeker I am like a guest" he says. Fundamentally, a guest is someone who would not ordinarily be in a given place; it has positive connotations and implies a welcoming host. In this context however, the word guest reflects a lack of connection or sense of ownership to the place, a forced reliance on the generosity of the host and an obligation to abide by their rules. But, he says "when I am doing volunteer work I am not a guest, I am a part of the culture", reflecting the sense of belonging that volunteer work fosters. The cocoon of direct provision is restrictive but volunteering "opens Ireland to me" states Musa, explaining that he is now "in a different world". The difference being that Ireland is now a place where he has a purpose, is now a society that he has a role in and contributes to. Volunteering has provided the conditions for a sense of belonging to burgeon despite a climate laden with challenges.

When Musa first moved to Ireland, he shared a room with 17 people from all over the world, Syria, Somalia, Ghana, Georgia, Kenya, "like the UN!" he laughs. While Musa touches on this humorously he also relays the tension these types of unnatural conditions can create.

Musa lives with another man, a friend from his village in Kenya. Musa tells me that his friend volunteers at a community garden every Saturday with other people from the hotel. This has profoundly affected the relationships between them. Musa describes how they arrive back to the hotel with dirt on their shoes, sometimes with vegetables that they have grown themselves. When they arrive back "they are so happy"; in the community garden, it doesn't matter what country you

come from, it doesn't matter if you don't speak the same language. "Everyone can still work together" says Musa, to "have something collective you can do together... breaks down barriers". His story shines a light on the transformative effect that providing small opportunities for positive engagement can have on an environment that could easily be extremely hostile.

Musa and his friend come from a village in Kenya where the landscape is semi-arid, so they rely on pastoral farming rather than arable. Volunteering in the community garden has provided an opportunity for his friend to learn a new skill, one that connects him to the land and its people. "He told me last Saturday he planted potatoes!" Musa exclaimed, "I said to him you never planted anything before. He said, now I am a pure farmer". Musa is cultivating his connection to Ireland through different volunteering roles. He shows me a picture of him volunteering on St Patrick's Day, an Irish flag painted on his smiling face, "I thought then I am officially an Irish person".

It is beautiful to see how volunteering has enabled these men to plant the roots of their lives in Ireland and allowing them to flourish. Musa is one of many incorporating Irishness into his identity, embracing the culture while imbuing it with the values and wisdom of his own culture and heritage.

"I am from another country, but I will make a big impact here" Musa states after telling me of his aspirations to do a 'Care of the Older Person' course in September.

How blessed we are to have a community of people here who have such a generosity of spirit and who have embraced the Irish people into their sphere of care.

Conclusion

As with any social phenomenon, there are interrelated layers to the impacts of volunteering on the individual and society.

When people are seeking international protection, they are essentially hanging in the balance, awaiting a life changing decision that they have no control over. This lack of control permeates the direct provision system with people denied access to the daily life decisions and responsibilities that most of us take for granted. As Kristin explained, volunteering is a way of doing something positive that one has control over. It's a way to express one's virtues in the world, nurturing the highest elements of one's self through the employment of agency despite the confines of circumstance.

As alluded to above, the stories illuminate how strength and resilience are cultivated through creating opportunities to engage in activities that provide meaning. Kristin puts it well, "when we feel that we have a purpose, when we feel like we matter and are contributing to something, it increases wellbeing". Wanting to contribute is a theme that emerged throughout all the interviews and is multifaceted. It seems to stem from a sense of graciousness but also from the desire to be a part of something greater than oneself. By enabling agency through opportunities to contribute, volunteering gives rise to the replenishment of one's inner strength.

The process of contributing, in turn, fosters the development of connection to one's new culture. Volunteering allows people to "get to know the culture from the inside out" as Kristin puts it. The stories show how Mhammed and Musa were enabled to partake in the traditions and practices of Ireland, such as the St Patrick's day celebrations. Being on the "inside" of this event rather than an observer seems to have facilitated identification with the culture.

In another strand, it is clear from the stories that volunteering created opportunities to form connections with other people. The connections it fosters are unique, as it brings "people on a joint quest, towards a joint goal" says Kristin; it doesn't matter where you come from, whether you have a

job or not, whether you speak the same language even. You're bringing people together who want to achieve the same goal, the common good.

While equality is something we espouse, the reality of our daily lives can be totally antithetical to it. But when working towards a goal through a voluntary task, people in direct provision are "participating in the same capacity as an Irish person, on the same ground" says Kristin. Volunteering creates an environment where someone new to the country is treated the same and valued the same as everyone else. While our circumstances can be totally different, our needs are the same. The need to have a sense of belonging is critical to human flourishing; through the unique types of connections formed through volunteer work this sense of belonging can grow.

The meaning of integration can become lost if the understanding of it remains at surface level and the processes underpinning it are not explored. Many of these processes exist on the intangible planes of our existence. Through investigating the practice of something like volunteer work, we can deepen our understanding of abstract concepts such as connection and belonging which are fundamental to integration. Hopefully this paper does justice to the stories of Salami, Mhammed and Musa and their courageous, compassionate, and admirable journeys of integration in Ireland.

In the context of increased migration to Ireland, we need to adjust our perspective to see the arrival of people from other cultures as an opportunity to learn. The concern and care that Salami, Mhammed and Musa show for the community is potentially representative of the values shared by the wider IPA community. Could migration be seen as an opportunity to rebuild the collective spirit that Ireland seems to be losing? If so, volunteering appears to be an effective mode of facilitating this, with care for the collective at its core. It is critical that the powers that be consider the opportunity presented by increased migration and ground policies that aspire towards integration in practical methods of achieving it, such as volunteering.

Dublin City Community Co-op wishes to thank Salami, Mhammed and Musa for sharing their stories and Dublin City Volunteer Centre for facilitating the introductions.

Bibliography

Niblock, S. (2007) "From 'knowing how' to 'Being able,'" *Journalism Practice*, 1(1), pp. 20–32.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780601078829>.

For further information on the work of Dublin City Community Cooperative contact:

Noel Wardick
Chief Executive Officer
nwardick@dublincitycommunitycoop.ie

Sofia Clifford-Riordan
Policy, Advocacy & Programmes Officer
sofia@dublincitycommunitycoop.ie