

Q and A on Oxfam's work on asylum issues in the UK

What does Oxfam do on asylum issues in the UK?

All over the world Oxfam works with people affected by crisis. In the UK this means helping those who are fleeing persecution abroad and seeking asylum here. Our work with asylum-seekers and refugees concentrates on two areas: ensuring the government meets its obligations, and helping refugees to overcome the prejudice they face in the UK.

What does Oxfam do on government asylum policy?

International law states that countries should offer asylum to people fleeing persecution and that no one should be sent back to a country where they will face danger. However, the UK government sometimes tries to stop people seeking safety in the UK and even returns asylum-seekers to dangerous situations. We work with partners to ensure that the UK meets its international obligations towards asylum-seekers and refugees.

How does Oxfam help asylum-seekers and refugees overcome prejudice?

We also work with asylum-seekers to help them overcome the prejudice they may face in the UK, and on challenging negative public and media attitudes towards asylum-seekers. For instance, we work with partners to run projects that bring asylum-seekers together with their host communities to break down the stereotyped idea the groups have about each other and help the communities to understand each other better. We work in partnership with a range of other national and community organisations that support refugees.

Why does Oxfam work on media and public attitudes towards asylum-seekers rather than providing them with direct support?

Negative portrayal of asylum-seekers in the media influences the environment in which public policies towards asylum-seekers are made; and negative attitudes among the general public affect the way asylum-seekers and refugees are treated in the community and can lead to harassment and racially motivated attacks. This is why Oxfam works primarily in the area of public and media attitudes towards asylum-seekers, while other organisations are better placed to deliver specific services to asylum-seekers and refugee groups.

What problems do asylum-seekers and refugees face in the UK?

Asylum seekers are amongst the poorest people in the UK; they have no right to work and receive a lower level of benefits than others while waiting for a decision on whether they are able to stay in the UK. Even when people are granted refugee status (or leave to remain) they are often unable to find higher paid work due to barriers such as prejudice, lack of recognition of their qualifications, poor level of English, or long periods of unemployment during the time they were asylum-seekers. The difficulties faced by asylum-seekers and refugees are compounded by the severe prejudice they face from the media, the public and politicians.

What other work does Oxfam do on asylum issues in the UK?

1. In Scotland: Asylum Positive Images Network

Oxfam initiated and supported the Asylum Positive Images Project and Network which works with asylum-seekers and refugees in the Scotland to challenge negative media portrayal of asylum issues and encourage more positive attitudes towards asylum seekers.

The network trains and supports asylum seekers in Scotland to act as spokespeople in the media – and to speak to journalism students and other groups about their experiences. Talking about why they were forced to leave their homes, and the difficulties they encounter in the UK – not being able to work, living on reduced benefits, and the threat of deportation – helps the media and public understand the situation of asylum-seekers and combats negative attitudes towards them.

APIN has also published a guide for journalists on reporting on refugee issues and facilitates annual 'media awards' during Refugee Week to celebrate fair and good media coverage of asylum issues. 'Primary ' An APIN video project with young asylum seekers showed that children in Glasgow welcome asylum seekers and challenged adults to do the same.

"For many people the word asylum-seeker has come to mean illegal immigrant – someone who is not genuine and has no real reason to be in the UK, says Oxfam's Jason Bergen. "Oxfam's experience with refugees all over the world shows us the horrific circumstances that force people to flee... and the need to protect vulnerable people who can't return home. This is why we are working to change public attitudes towards asylum- seekers in the UK. We are making a difference. Research shows that public attitudes towards asylum are more positive in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. Oxfam's work has played a significant part in this."

2. In Wales: Supporting refugee and asylum seeking women

In Wales, Oxfam is starting a major three-year project with refugee and asylum seeking women, funded by the Big Lottery. Women seeking asylum have often experienced particular persecution because of their gender (having experienced rape in their home country, or their asylum status depending on their husband), which may need particular consideration, support or services which they are not getting at the moment.

Oxfam will be running a range of activities including:

- working with refugee women to build their confidence to participate in the community, and seek the help and services they need;
- training refugee women to act as champions who will support other refugee women, building a support network which will enable women to share information and advice with others;
- running projects which will break down barriers between refugee women and women in the local community;
- working with service providers in the fields of health, education and social services helping them to make sure their services meet the particular needs of refugee women, for instance making sure that English classes provide crèche facilities, or providing translation services so that women do not rely on partners to translate in sensitive situations.