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It's a long, long way from there to here - Armel Ntwari

My name is Armel Ntwari. I am 19 years going on 20. I come from Burundi. I am in Ireland since October 2003. I came to Ireland as an asylum seeker. I didn't know what asylum seeking meant when I came to Ireland. It was explained to me though at the ORAC (Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner), and later on I got to understand what it involved etc. I came to Ireland because the political situation in Burundi was uncertain. We had been in an ethnic civil war for 10 years. When I first arrived in Ireland, I was taken to a hostel in Dublin's city centre. It was for unaccompanied minors who sought asylum, between age 16-17 years. We had one social worker for the whole hostel (about 30 people) who visited us once a week. In case we needed any help, we either had to arrange for an appointment at her office, or wait till she came to visit the hostel.

I was getting €19 every week for discretionary expenses. The only things you could buy with it was a body spray, €5 call credit and probably go to an internet café for 2 hours only. After about three weeks, I was put into school (O'Connell School) in town. We were given about €14 a week for transport, which brings our total weekly allowance to €33. We used to walk to school and save the transport money in order to buy either a pair of shoes or a stereo for our room. I remember me and my roommates doing something like a cooperative whereby every week six of us would give €15 to one person, and do the same with a different person every week. One person would have €90 at a go, and he could use it to buy something (a pair of shoes or something he liked). When it was my turn, I bought a stereo.

The management in the hostel was good at that time. Although we had occasional problems from time to time, if any problem arose, the manager would do her best to try and sort it out. The only problem was that there was no study room. Studying was therefore a problem. One thing I liked about the hostel was that we were given African food on weekends. There were African chefs who cooked during weekends. The facilities in the hostel were also good. The rooms were nice and tidy (properly cleaned on a daily basis) and every room had its own shower.

What I disliked about it was the location. It was 5 mins walk from Temple Bar. At weekends it was almost impossible to sleep. Drunken people out of clubs and pubs would be shouting on the street just under my window, from midnight till maybe four in the morning.

I was moved on to a different hostel in April 2004, which was not direct provision. There we were able to cook for ourselves, and we were getting €124 at the time for food etc. It was much better than the previous hostel in that I was able to do more things as I had a bit of money to spare. I used to socialise with schoolmates, go to leisure centres, cinema, clubs, etc. Unlike the previous hostel, I didn't always have to go to the welfare office in case I needed money for something. I was able to afford what I wanted. The good thing about self-catering hostels was that one was able to eat what he wants and liked, and not what was cooked for us in direct provision. Moreover, it taught me how to budget and spend money wisely.

When I was 18, I was moved to a direct provision hostel for young adult asylum seekers. I found the change very stressful. We were given food from a set menu, and not allowed to eat what we wanted. There were times to eat. After those times, no food was kept. That meant that we had to be in the hostel by certain times in order to eat. The hostel facilities were awful! Some showers were broken; sometimes we would have no water nor heating, even in winter time, for like two days.

When one complains to the management about it, they say they will sort it, or they called a plumber, and maybe after two weeks or three weeks of us harassing them, a plumber might come and only have a look at the problem. It still won't be sorted.

Alongside the hostel problems, there is school as well. Mates ask us to go out with them at weekends but we almost can't because there is money involved. With only 19€ a week, not much can be done. It's not always easy to say that you are on welfare in that is seen as being lazy and not wanting to work (especially if you are an asylum seeker). Moreover, it's frustrating to know that things you were able to afford back home are now a luxury in Ireland. For example, go to the swimming pool, or socialising.

For me, being able to experience both direct provision and self-catering hostels, I have to say that self-catering is definitely more suitable than direct provision. I believe direct provision favours hostels owners. Residents literally live like animals. Not many people care about them, except from voluntary groups. I believe government agencies such as RIA (Reception and Integration Agency) probably might not even know the location of the hostels. I rang RIA once to complain about water and heating, and the person who was responsible for overseeing the hostel personally told me that she had never been to visit it. Complaints are dealt with on paper or by phone only, whereas if a resident causes trouble, within an hour the resident would be moved.

Finally, even though in Ireland (and in many European countries), they say that there are guaranteed rights of children, for asylum seekers they are non-existent. During the interview for asylum, we are treated as adults. Interviewers and judges at ORAC (Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner) and RAT (Refugee Appeals Tribunal) do not take into account that we might not know the exact political situation of our countries. The burden is on us to prove our story. If what we say does not match what the interviewer found on the Internet, we are refused refugee status. I personally find it outrageous and ridiculous that the interviewer and the judge at RAT say they do not believe that I was in danger in Burundi because of some report she found on the Net which did not 100% match what I told her. I personally feel that staff in the ORAC and the RAT think they know more than us about our own countries. They also seem to think that we came in Ireland just to try our luck, wait three, four, and in some cases, six years to see if we can be allowed to stay in Ireland while in the meantime living on just €19 a week.

Although the goodwill of some civil servants is questionable, some people are of great help to us. For example, school staff are very friendly and helpful. Students as well are very friendly and helpful, and good-hearted people who give up their time and energy to help us (like Dun Laoghaire Refugee Project). The only problem with school staff and other students is that they do not know much about the asylum system and procedure, and they know very little about the harsh conditions in which we live in Ireland. On the other hand, the media does not bring all of the above to public attention.