

## A LONG JOURNEY – A SAFE HARBOUR

12 December 2006, around 20.00 in the evening. The atmosphere in the meeting room on the top floor of a luxury hotel in Malta is nervous but at the same time festive and exhilarated. Around forty men and women, but mainly men, are slightly hesitant to sit down on the seats placed in rows in front of a small podium. They greet each other, admire the impressive sea view, say hi to their teachers and make jokes with the social workers. They are asylum seekers from all over the world, but mainly from African countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Congo. This evening marks a very special occasion for them as they will receive their certificates for having completed the courses offered by "Asylum Seekers Partnership. Some receive certification of their English skills, while many others have followed the full training package, which also included labour market orientation and "life" skills.

The ceremony starts with a welcome by Joseph Gerada, Chief Executive Officer of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services. He welcomes the asylum seekers and the representatives from the organisations which together make up the EQUAL partnership since 2005. He thanks everyone for their commitment, enthusiasm and perseverance in making the project a success: for the first time in Maltese history, asylum seekers are gathered as graduates. It has been a great learning experience for both the organisations and the beneficiaries. The manager of the Development Partnership, Stephen Vella from the same foundation, also expresses his admiration for both the project workers and the participants. A young couple of asylum seekers come forward to symbolically receive their certificates on behalf of the entire group. They have a newborn child with them, showing how life even after great tragedy and hardship goes on.

Towards the end of the ceremony, a song called The Journey is played, composed by a local musician with spoken word from different asylum seekers. The song describes the incredible flight most of them have experienced to come to Europe, telling about the family members they had to leave behind, about their first positive experiences in Malta and their hopes for the future. After the song, the certificates are handed out to all proud participants. Everyone is then invited to join the dinner which has been prepared in the restaurant downstairs in the hotel, to celebrate the official end of the courses. "The asylum seekers have managed to gain the trust of the local community" comments Anthony Cauchi, coordinator of the EQUAL partnership, "by showing that they are here with a purpose: they want to work hard and start a new life. Malta may not have been their destination of choice, but they have impressed the population with their commitment and enthusiasm".

## A NEW PHENOMENON...

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Since its entry in the European Union, Malta has experienced a drastic increase of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. In 2002, nearly 1700 persons requested asylum, which is an enormous number for a small country of around 380,000 inhabitants. Most of the newcomers arrive by boat, having risked crossing the dangerous Mediterranean Sea on ships that were never made to travel such distances. The boats are overcrowded and living conditions are extremely poor, with women and children being those most at risk during the long trip. Even more shocking is that most of the boats do not wish to come ashore on Malta and are even trying to escape from the coastal guard when, by accident, entering Malta's territorial waters. The dream of most refugees and other immigrants is to arrive on Europe's mainland, where it is easier for them to join friends, family and ethnic communities. Malta is not considered to be a final destination, even though it seems that slowly but surely recognised refugees have started to settle on this small island.

Today, on average 3,000 asylum seekers are in Malta, a phenomenon which has not gone unnoticed by the local population. But once arrived on Maltese territory, the plight of the asylum

seekers is not over. In order to manage the high numbers of people arriving in Malta, the government has set up detention centres which serve to check the admissibility of their applications for asylum or other forms of protection. The conditions in these centres are not of high quality, with part of the occupants having to live in tents. The centres are controlled by the police and the army, and the inhabitants have little access to legal advice, education and other forms of support. Local NGOs are allowed to enter the centres but find it difficult to help people who are, in a sense, prisoners. While vulnerable groups such as women and families with children spent only a few weeks in the centres, other asylum seekers might have to spend up to 18 months in detention. "This situation is extremely frustrating for people who are often already traumatised", stresses Isabelle Sicott, social worker with the EQUAL partnership. "Spending such a long time without any meaningful activity also endangers their ability and willingness to integrate once they are allowed to leave the centres".

## REQUIRING A NEW RESPONSE

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Early 2005, the Ministry of Family and Social Solidarity asked the Foundation for Social Welfare Services to come forward with suggestions for a project to be financed by the EQUAL theme promoting the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers, or shortly referred to as the EQUAL Asylum Seekers theme. The Foundation was well placed to pilot such integration activities, having a long tradition with the provision of assistance to other disadvantaged groups. With one of its daughter organisations (APPOGG, meaning 'support') being responsible for the open reception centres for asylum seekers and refugees, EQUAL provided the Foundation with a real chance to help the newcomers to start their lives in Malta. However, at the same time asylum seekers were also a new group, with particular needs and facing many restrictions to integrate – not even mentioning the hostile climate around to whole theme of immigration.

The EQUAL Project foresaw to the development of a training package consisting of three consecutive modules, including English lessons, 'life skills' and labour market orientation. In this last stage of the project, measures are also being developed to help asylum seekers build a portfolio so that they have a higher chance to access training opportunities and better employment – meaning in most cases formal employment as supposed to working on the black market. "We started with a long recruitment phase, were we tried to convince asylum seekers to join our courses. This was not an easy task, as many are already working full-time. Initially, we started with a group of 30 asylum seekers, but when they all began telling their friends and family how interesting the courses were, the group expanded to more than 100 people and we actually had had to refuse many more" comments Stephen Vella enthusiastically.

The Education and Training Corporation provided the English literacy courses, with 45 asylum seekers successfully completing this module. Face-to-face pre-interviews were organised with interested clients to assess their level of English. Three groups were created which each followed a total of 160 hours of training, divided over nine hours per week for small groups of maximum 15 persons. Two teachers were present in each class to ensure continuous attention and feedback. The approach was highly interactive, making the trainee the determinant factor. The format is informal, often outside the traditional classrooms and using games to capture the interest of the asylum seekers. "Working with such heterogeneous groups, in terms of cultural backgrounds and religions, can be quite challenging. It is important for teachers to understand and work with these differences", comments Nicolette Cammilleri, teacher and coordinator of the module.

The General Workers' Union has developed the labour market orientation module, which is based on a successful method used for long-term unemployed persons. The module is taught in small groups placing a strong focus on job interviewing, interaction and communication. "We interview a lot of people", says Michael Parnis, head of this largest national trade union. "We use this extensive experience to explain to asylum seekers how to best behave, emphasising the importance of timeliness, of communication and simple gestures such as a firm grip when shaking hands with your interviewers". We use interactive games requiring a lot of team work, simulations and role plays. It is all about cultural understanding. The course has been such a success that discussions are now ongoing with the Employment Training Centre to provide it at national level for school leavers. But what is perhaps even more important, is that the trade union is strengthening and protecting the rights of asylum seekers, which may help to decrease their

exploitation by employers. “We are sending a strong message to employers that there is a level playing field” concludes Michael Parnis.

The courses were accompanied by social support and recreational activities. Appogg set up a small vocational guidance team of experienced social workers to encourage asylum seekers to join the newly created courses and to follow them from beginning to end. “You cannot successfully insert someone into the labour market when they have a lot of social problems. We therefore actually do a bit of everything” explains Isabelle Sicott, one of the four team members “such as helping mothers to find childcare during the courses, accompanying people to the doctor, looking together at housing opportunities and convincing them to stay in the courses even when it becomes heavy to combine it with their job. Some travel more than an hour per day to come to the training sessions, so you can imagine that after a long day work it is difficult to find the motivation to leave home again”. But in order to also provide some recreational diversion from the training programme, the team also organised several study visits to discover the country’s culture and heritage and social gatherings for asylum seekers and the local community.

## **A PERSONAL AND EMPOWERING APPROACH**

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“You said you left Liberia when you were 11 and again at 25 years. After what I read I am not surprised that you expressed the fear of losing ‘your soul’ if you continued to stay on [...]. Reading through the story is shocking; living through it must have been horrific. No wonder you are so withdrawn when you speak about the people of your country”. This is an excerpt from a letter used by the therapists to enhance communication with the asylum seekers taking part in the ‘life’ skills course. The module, organised by the Maltese Red Cross, is all about empowering asylum seekers and giving them a voice. Through various group sessions which are facilitated by two professional therapists, asylum seekers are encouraged to discuss their experiences and expectations through games, writing and working together. The courses go deep and do not avoid emotions and confrontations. Sometimes the groups bring together persons from two opposite sides in civil wars or other conflicts.

The course is built around 5 principles: confidentiality, honesty, respect, non-judgmental attitude and openness. Many of the participants find it hard to open up in the first sessions, but such barriers are slowly broken down. They learn how to manage their anger, speak without hurting other people’s feelings and face hard decisions such as repatriation. Many feel truly relieved and improved once they are approaching the end of the module. The course gives them back their motivation and self-confidence. “Together with the other modules, we provide an informal and holistic programme combining social work, psychological support and vocational integration”, says Silvia Galea from the Maltese Red Cross, one of the ‘life’ skills facilitators. “We call it Reception Plus, going beyond merely giving people a place to sleep and some food”.

The Journey, the song performed at the graduation ceremony of the asylum seekers proves that the group dares to express themselves. The stories told through spoken word are very personal, and the performers do not shy away from their emotions. Equally, during the dinner organised by the EQUAL partnership at the end of the celebration, the discussions at the table are of a similar open nature. “In my country, the conflicts between the different clans are getting worse every day” recounts Hassan<sup>1</sup> from Somalia. “It was not safe for me to stay there. Together with other refugees, we travelled for a long time until we finally arrived in Libya, where they gave us a boat. We didn’t want to go to Malta, we were aiming to arrive in Italy and travel further north. The detention centre was a terrible experience, but now that I’ve had to chance to learn and work, I feel much better here. I might even stay in Malta”.

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed.

## A NEW PARTNERSHIP

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The EQUAL 'Asylum Seekers Partnership' brings together an interesting mix of organisations which had never worked so intensively together. The partnership is managed by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, a state-funded organisation with a long tradition in assisting disadvantaged groups, but which had never before worked with asylum seekers. Other organisations participating in the project include the Appogg, a daughter organisation of the Foundation, the Employment and Training Corporation, a public organisation acting both as a training provider and employment service, the General Worker's Union, the largest national trade union in Malta and the Maltese Red Cross, member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The EQUAL partnership also comprises two reception centres.

"For us, this new and very heterogeneous target group, with special needs and characteristics, required a unique combination of actors" explains Joseph Gerada, heading the Foundation. "On the one hand, we have a partner who is used to working with asylum seekers and refugees, bringing in valuable know-how and experience. On the other hand, we have partners that can offer practical approaches while at the same time really put the issue of asylum seekers on the policy agenda and raise awareness amongst the Maltese population." The roles and responsibilities of the organisations were clearly defined at the onset of the EQUAL partnership, making sure that maximum use was made of their competences, expertise and connections. Even though partners took responsibility for a certain activity or course, all were in regular contact and consulted on the content and focus of their respective actions. It was especially important for the social workers, teachers and therapist to regularly discuss their clients to make sure that the various project activities met their needs and obtained their maximum involvement.

For the he General Worker's Union, for example, participating in the EQUAL project proved to be a real eye opener. "By running the training sessions and being in daily contact with the asylum seekers, we have, as an organisation, learned more about different cultures and traditions", argues Michael Parnis. "The same happens to Maltese workers who have asylum seekers as new colleagues. Increasingly we receive requests from companies that are interested in hiring asylum seekers". At the same time, the involvement of the trade union helps to ensure adequate working conditions and levels. A recent survey has shown that unfortunately migrants are working in jobs which are below their skills and capacity, but it is hoped that the Development Partnership will help tackle this problem. "We should especially not forget that the asylum seekers we help today may be tomorrow's clients and advocates".

## CONTACT DETAILS

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