

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF IMMIGRATION: FROM THREAT TO OPPORTUNITY

The number of foreign residents in Upper Austria has grown by 40% since the early 1990s and now they represent more than 7 % of the population. In absolute figures this means that, amongst the Austrian states, Upper Austria hosts the second largest foreign population, after Vienna. The most significant immigrant groups come from Ex-Yugoslavia (53%) and from Turkey (17%). Against this background, the eastern enlargement of the EU and, in particular, the dismantling of the common border with the Czech Republic has fermented fears of competition and of being “crowded out” by even more foreigners arriving in a new wave of immigration.

“We need to stimulate a sustainable process of reflection upon these issues. Fear is a poor adviser. We must remove the frontiers that exist in the people’s minds. This is why information and raising awareness of the general public are the core activities of the project” said Alfred Obermüller, who was then a Member of Parliament in Upper Austria, at a press conference that outlined the ambitions of the [Living and Working Together](#) Development Partnership (DP). Under the overall management of the regional branch of the Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) in Linz, this project has been one of the few EQUAL DPs throughout Europe in which a Trade Union organisation has taken the lead role.

RAISING AWARENESS AND COUNTERACTING FEARS THROUGH INFORMATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Living and Working Together launched a well-targeted and diversified information campaign to convince the population that attitudinal change in relation to migrants and minorities was essential if the region was to develop as both an economically strong and a socially inclusive business area. Local and regional media followed this campaign with great interest. *“Before we began our work in the DP such positive reporting about our Czech neighbours was unimaginable. Our programme has clearly helped to put into perspective many wrong perceptions and unjustified fears”* explains Gabriele Lackner-Strauss, Chair of the Chamber of Employers in Freistadt, and also Chairperson of the *EUREGIO Regional Management Mühlviertel* and Member of Parliament in Upper Austria.



The *Living and Working Together* DP combined three distinct but mutually reinforcing lines of action to raise the public’s awareness about xenophobia and racism and to promote the empowerment of minorities.

TACKLING XENOPHOBIC ATTITUDES THAT HINDER INITIATIVES FOR REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Fostering regional development through promoting a trans-border labour market was the main thrust of the activities of the [EUREGIO Regional Management Mühlviertel](#). The “Mühlviertel” area borders South Bohemia in the Czech Republic and in terms of its economy it is one of the weakest regions in Austria. Though EU enlargement was opening up new perspectives for change and growth, the employers and also their workforces were very sceptical about these opportunities mainly because they were not yet familiar with strategies for cross-border regional development.

The *EUREGIO Regional Management Mühlviertel* launched a comprehensive programme of information seminars and workshops together with a very successful mobile exhibition. This programme addressed employers and employees, those responsible for labour market policy and local decision makers across all 122 local communities in the Mühlviertel area. It stimulated debate on the opportunities emerging from the eastern enlargement, on issues related to “new migration” and on the integration of “traditional” migrants and minorities. Discussion and action groups were organised for those trades or industrial sectors which felt that they might be particularly affected by these issues. This, in turn, led to continuing regular contacts between actors from both sides of the border, especially in the sectors of transport and care services. In addition, about 700 people participated in *Local Community Dialogue* events that brought together members of municipal councils, mayors, local associations and multipliers and a bi-lingual regional information platform was developed that continues to be accessible via the internet.

GATHERING EVIDENCE OF RACIST DISCRIMINATION, PROMOTING DEBATE AND OFFERING HELP

A central Anti-Racism Contact Point (ARAS) with five local branches was set up by [migrare](#), one of the NGO partners in the DP, to identify, document and, where appropriate, inquire into racist/xenophobic incidents. ARAS offers legal information, advice and practical support to victims of racism that is provided by experienced multilingual staff. However, people reporting these incidents, such as discrimination in job applications or house hunting, are frequently afraid that a more public “airing” of their cases might make their individual situations even worse. Therefore ARAS offers a multi-stage process of support, including telephone contact, information/counselling meetings and mediation, that protects the anonymity of its clients, if they so wish. A regional Advisory Council has also been established, in cooperation with the police, to provide guidance on measures that may be needed to follow up those cases which have been documented. This Council involves politicians and also key actors from the Employment Service, the Chamber of Employers, the Trade Union Federation and NGOs working with migrants. Based on several hundred cases that it has recorded, *migrare* will publish, in autumn 2005, a Report on Racism and Xenophobia in Upper Austria and the future work of ARAS will be closely associated with the equality body that has been created following adoption, by the regional Parliament, of a new anti-discrimination bill.

In parallel to these activities, *migrare* has also organised a series of 20 workshops, using very flexible and different approaches. Ten of these workshops were aimed at informing the indigenous population, especially organisations and individuals with responsibilities related to the integration of migrants. The other ten have provided special opportunities for members of single minorities and multi-ethnic groups to exchange their experience and develop strategies for coping with racist incidents.

TRAINING MULTIPLIERS TO IMPROVE INTERCULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN ENTERPRISES

The *Trade Union Federation* piloted a model for a new type of intercultural multiplier courses which involves the paired participation of shop stewards together with fellow workers from migrant or minority origin. Current Austrian legislation still prevents non-EU/EEA nationals from being elected as members of Works Councils or representatives to the Chamber of Workers and Employees and this is in direct contradiction with EU law. “Against this background”, says Heinrich Wenidoppler, the DP coordinator, “these courses are particularly relevant and have a strong innovatory quality, as they prepare workers of non-EU nationality to represent their interests within individual enterprises. This representation is made in partnership with Austrian workers and helps to dismantle existing preconceptions related to the future participation of workers from “third countries” in the works councils of Austrian companies”. These courses have now been integrated into the regular programme of the regional trade union training centre.

[Products](#) that were prepared to support these activities include an audiovisual package of material for use in education/training sessions and information activities and a comparative analysis of legislation in Austria and in the EU on practices of representation in works councils. In addition, a short scenic movie was produced jointly with the DP’s transnational partners to stimulate reflection on prejudice and stereotyping. All the actions of the DP have been well

informed by relevant research on the implications of EU enlargement for the trans-border labour market, perceived discriminations, the employment situation of ethnic minorities and migrants and the attitudes of the population in the area in which the DP operates.

AFTER THREE YEARS OF LIVING AND WORKING TOGETHER, THE RESULTS ARE ENCOURAGING.

There is now a more open attitude towards cross-frontier cooperation amongst employers in the border area and especially amongst SMEs, and a much stronger interest in exploring the potential of the new market. *“Initially, I saw enlargement as a threat. I was afraid of the new, and possibly fierce, competition and felt that the government should do more to protect domestic companies. I now realise that we must adapt to the new situation and I now know how I can do that. The opening of the labour market has provided new opportunities to develop our business, together with Czech partners. My first contact with them has shown me that they face problems that are very similar to ours”* says Walter, who runs a small transport firm.

There are indications that the existence and the work of the new Anti-Racism Contact Points and the related programme of workshops have already had a positive impact. The views expressed by one migrant woman reflect the feelings of many others: *“It is good to know that there are people in my area who listen and don’t laugh at us. It almost feels like being beamed back home, where we mattered and had a place, where we could commit ourselves and participate in gatherings and meetings. We have taken new courage to raise our voices in public and show that we do exist”*.

The intercultural multiplier courses organised by the Trade Union have been very promising. Participants believe that they are now able to create and sustain a dialogue between Austrian and migrant workers. *“The course that I attended with my Austrian colleague has given us new ideas”* says Irena, who was trained as a physician’s assistant in Bosnia but now works in the stock department of an electrical wholesaler. *“The Austrians are correct in their behaviour, but they have little interest in their foreign colleagues. We now plan to re-arrange the lunch room in our workshop into a real ‘space of encounter’, where we can have better contact and more exchange. We will also suggest that one of our non-Austrian colleagues be elected as a trusted person to participate in the activities of the works council”*.

ACHIEVING IMPACT THROUGH A DELIBERATE AND SUSTAINED APPROACH TO WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

The DP brought together nine key, regional actors who shared concerns that fears about the negative effects of immigration would hamper the region’s capacity to tap into the new opportunities emerging from the opening of the labour market. *“EU enlargement is clearly generating new chances for the development of our economy. But we will only benefit from them, if we overcome our mental blockages vis à vis the Czech Republic and if our companies become more proactive”* said Josef Gunz, Professor at the University of Linz and evaluator of the DP, in summarising the common challenge that the partners had to face. He also stressed that *“in order to mobilise the full potential of our workforce, we must work vigorously to counteract all manifest and latent forms of discrimination and xenophobia that might prevent the integration of immigrant or migrant workers”*.

The first step in tackling this challenge was the creation of a common platform for planning and action that involved all of the relevant stakeholders, including both operators in the field and the strategic partners. This partnership was set up as an association under civil law. Decisions on strategy and approach were discussed, and progress was reviewed, at the quarterly meetings of the Advisory Board, which involved not only the operational and strategic partners but also those responsible for transversal tasks, such as gender mainstreaming, evaluation, quality control, IT and financial management. These decision-making meetings of the DP were chaired by a representative of the regional Government.

This structure and the direct involvement of the regional government gave the DP a considerable status which was recognised by others and this, in turn, stimulated the accountability and

commitment of the individual partners. It also helped in the allocation of clear and distinct responsibilities and in ensuring that these were respected. The cooperative working and information processes within the Partnership created a climate of mutual trust and it also engendered a spirit of fruitful competition in demonstrating good practice and achieving effective outcomes.

The concept of Partnership was crucial to the success of the DP. Karakurt Mümtaz, the Director of migrare, explained that *"the Partnership idea, and the way in which it was implemented, provided the most important lubricant for our work and established a stable framework for cooperation. It has proved effective in pooling and combining our different activities under the one roof of our common objectives and in solving possible conflicts of interest"*.

The impact of the DP is clearly attributable to its concerted approach in which partners subsumed their individual interests for the common good. This coordinated action made it possible to address simultaneously, and with consistent information and messages, a wide range of different target groups that make up the "constituencies" of the partners. These include: workers and employees who face direct or indirect discrimination on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin; managers and staff of enterprises with a high proportion of workers from a migrant or ethnic minority origin; workers who are entrusted with specific tasks in the representation of interests and the solution of conflict; public administrations and services; interest groups; multipliers; and mediators. It is now obvious to all involved that such a wide audience could never have been reached by action on the part of each, individual partner.

The operational partners who carried out the activities stress that involving strategic stakeholders right from the start has been the key to the DP's success. These strategic partners, who include the Chamber of Employers, the Chamber of Workers, the regional Government and relevant NGOs, provided advice and policy support in the design, coordination and development of all actions. But equally important, they are currently the key actors in ensuring that almost all of the activities piloted by *Living and Working Together* will be continued as part of mainstream programmes in Upper Austria.

Contact

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