

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

1. THE PROBLEM

When asylum seekers arrive in a new country, their first needs are centred on finding a place to stay and accessing some support for their basic needs. At a later stage in the application process, other needs arise. Whether they obtain a status or not, it is important that they are kept motivated and helped in their further personal development, both in relation to improving their social situation and to enhancing their vocational development.

There are marked differences between the quality and extent of the services provided in the Member States as well as the financial and human resources available for reception and support, especially following Enlargement. In some cases, the resources available are being used inefficiently due to lack of experience or because support and hosting structures are at a very early stage of development, especially in the New Member States.

As a result, services and activities for asylum seekers are often overlapping or show serious gaps. Also, the lack of coordination, experience and training leads to overall insufficient knowledge and understanding of asylum seekers' conditions, needs, and, more importantly, the potential of asylum seekers to contribute to the host society. Consequently, asylum seekers who are faced with qualitatively poor services do not receive adequate support for their integration or return to their home country and may become de-motivated.

It is positive to notice that the capacity in some Member States, with a high-number of on-the-ground, small-medium scale actors operating for the benefit of asylum seekers, is growing. Increasingly organisations are joining forces to provide one-stop-shops, to create strong networks linking the public authorities and other relevant stakeholders and to ensure a similar quality of services throughout their national territory. New networks are being developed and existing networks consolidated as part of Round 2 of EQUAL.

2. POLICY RELEVANCE

2.1. THE EUROPEAN NATURE OF THE ISSUE

Current levels of asylum seekers are a little less than half of the peak level of 700,000 in 1992. The number of applications lodged has continued the downward trend which was noted in the 2004 Policy Briefs reviewing the situation in 2002-2003, falling about 35% since 2000. The Dublin Convention, establishing the safe-country-of-transit rule within the EU, has led to strong reductions in some Member States but increases in others. Especially the countries that establish the borders of the EU, and in particular the New Member States, have witnessed higher numbers of applications (e.g. Finland, Poland and the Slovak Republic). Other countries are also still confronted with higher numbers of asylum seekers, such as France and Hungary, the former receiving more requests than any other country in the EU. In relative terms, applications remain substantial in Austria and Sweden¹.

In all EU countries, recognition rates remain low, often less than 10% of the requests. With the continuing fall in asylum seekers and the low acceptance rates, it is likely that refugees and other persons admitted for humanitarian reasons (including their accompanying family) will make up a lower proportion of the total long-term migrant population in the EU. Despite these falling numbers, asylums seekers still make up around 10% of the total migrant population today.

¹ Policy Plan on Legal Migration, DG Justice, Freedom and Security, December 2005. Based on Eurostat data and projections.

2.2. EU POLICY FRAMEWORK

The 1999 Tampere European Council put forward the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). For many of the Member States especially the adoption of the Directive on Minimum Standards on the Reception of Asylum Seekers and its subsequent implementation will require substantial capacity building efforts. The CEAS has been complemented by the European Refugee Fund (ERF), which is focused on improving reception conditions for asylum seekers and refugees and which has therefore been an important instrument for building the capacity of the organisations that have benefited from its financial support. The current ERF is due to end in 2008, but a new phase of the programme has been agreed and will continue until 2013.

The revamped Social Agenda, published beginning 2005, draws attention to Europe's need for a greater number of workers in order to attain the Lisbon growth and jobs objectives. It calls for a process of consultation as to how the question of economic migration should be tackled in this regard. The Green Paper on Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations looks at the extent to which migration can make a contribution to mitigate the effects of the falling population in Europe.

The Social Inclusion Process, an important EU policy instrument part of the Social Agenda, highlights in its 2006 implementation report the need to increase the integration of ethnic minorities and migrants and the growing social challenges of increased immigration in relation to, for example, health and insurance costs. The development of measures to increase their integration are considered a priority for the close future at both Member State and EU levels, especially given the role that immigration can play in sustaining labour markets.

Asylum seekers are not formally included in the above policy initiatives, but they are certainly a highly disadvantaged group to be included in integration measures. It is important to consider that on average around 10% of the asylum seekers will receive a status, thus becoming part of the migrant population.

3. NEW SOLUTIONS: GOOD PRACTICE FROM EQUAL

3.1. FACTORS THAT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Nearly 85% of the 61 Development partnerships active under Round 2 of EQUAL are focusing on capacity building. This includes the organisation of studies and analyses, the development of methods (e.g. for education), providing training to those that work with asylum seekers, networking, awareness raising and evaluation.

Identified key success factors for setting up support systems for asylum seekers are:

- Strong partnership and collaboration arrangements. A clear work programme and collaboration agreements, in a formal or less formal setup, helped to enhance coordination and to ensure efficient, effective and well-targeted actions as well as good quality services. Specific cooperation agreements enhanced commitment of partners to certain expected results and provided them with clarity on roles, responsibilities and tasks. Partnerships were often successful when they comprised a wide range of stakeholders from the public, NGO and private sector at various levels (national, regional and local).
- Networking tools, such as online databases, matching tools and other practical mechanisms to facilitate partnership working and to match asylum seekers with education, training and employment opportunities.
- Actions to improve the knowledge and understanding of those working with asylum seekers regarding this group's specific conditions and needs in terms of regulatory challenges, labour market information, cultural and psychological issues, etc.
- Capacity building actions to improve the interface with the local community and make the wider public aware of asylum seekers' conditions, needs and potential. Important factors

to achieve this include strategic involvement of key actors, such as employers, employer organisations and social partners, activation of citizens and using marketing to increase awareness.

3.2. EVIDENCE

In April 2004, nearly all Round 1 EQUAL partnerships in the Asylum Seekers theme took part in a practice event to share experiences and good practices and to select, through a peer review process, those approaches that were considered to work best and which appeared most transferable. A total of 25 promising practices, covering 66% of all EQUAL partnerships in the theme, had been pre-selected following a EU wide call, in which Development Partnerships were invited to complete a questionnaire explaining how the practice worked, its results and main benefits. This was followed by a first assessment by thematic experts and a validation process led by representatives from the Commission, ECRE, Management Authorities, National Support Structures and EQUAL partnerships.

The European Thematic Group is currently identifying Development Partnerships active under Round 2 which could be presented at a European Asylum Policy Forum which is being organised by the Swedish Managing Authority in May 2007. One of the three main seminars and several workshops will be dedicated to the presentation and discussions on EQUAL good practices in the area of awareness raising, training of staff working with asylum seekers and networking. Specific attention will be placed on the extent to which the EQUAL practices have contributed to the adoption of measures at Member State level that go beyond the minimum standards of the Reception Directive.

The work undertaken within the sub-theme of capacity building has so far revealed the following positive outcomes:

Networks improve communication between actors and create a better understanding and increased knowledge of asylum issues

The six practices selected in this area illustrated that the networks, established by DPs, were quite diverse. Some were of a strategic nature, including national level actors such as immigration boards and public employment services, whilst other had a very operational focus, working directly with asylum seekers (e.g. formalised “tri-partite” cooperation agreements between either reception structures, NGOs, training organisations, mentors or employers and asylum seekers agreeing on individual pathways to employment). Other partnerships focussed on integrating the activities of their project into wider collaboration frameworks for employment and insertion, such as the Territorial Employment Pacts.

The Spanish DP ENEAS – EQUAL has developed such collaboration agreements with the final aim to help asylum seekers into employment. One example refers to a collaboration agreement between a regional authority, a training provider and a public reception centre for asylum seekers run by IMSERSO (Institute of Elderly and Social Affairs). The agreement concerns integrating asylum seekers into a regular vocational training programme with the potential of receiving a work contract in case of successful completion of the courses. Through its continuation under Round 2, ENEAS EQUAL is expanding the collaboration agreements further across the full national territory. A regional television station in Andalucía has helped the Development Partnership to develop a DVD which is used to convince employers to enter such agreements. The DVD describes the purpose and benefits of the job placements and shows interviews with asylum seekers, employers and representatives of training organisations. The reaction to the DVD are very positive, attracting substantial interest from employers interested in taking part in the scheme.

On the whole, all networking activities have contributed to a better understanding and increased knowledge of asylum issues. But there is more: they have actually convinced partners to adopt a more “flexible” attitude towards the many regulatory obstacles asylum seekers often face. For example in Germany, an informal agreement from the relevant authorities was obtained which meant that asylum seekers who received a negative decision, were allowed to continue to take part in a vocational training programme, given that the new vocational profile was considered highly interesting by several potential employers.

Networking tools facilitate coordination of services and “matching”

More than 20% of the DPs have developed specific tools and frameworks to facilitate communication and matching of asylum seekers with organisations providing training, employers and other services. Several DPs have created databases, most of which are accessible online. These, for the first time, link and encourage cooperation between a wide range of services and organisations in the field of education and training, employers and other actors. At the same time these networking tools register the specific needs and potential of asylum seekers, thus helping them to access to the linked services and match their profiles to training and employment opportunities. Particularly successful examples were noted when central government-run systems were lacking or national resources were insufficient.

A highly sophisticated online database 'ESTIA' has been created by the Greek DP Anadrasii-Istos to "match" asylum seekers to services, training and employment opportunities. The database links a total of 40 operators in more than 22 contact points over the whole Attica-Thessaloniki-Crete axis. It includes detailed information on the mandate and functions of its network partners as well as asylum seeker profiles. ESTIA acts as a one-stop-shop for asylum seekers and is an excellent coordination / communication tool for the connected organisations. Thanks to its continuation under Round 2, ESTIA is extending the network connected to the database. Limited access is now directly provided to employers so that they can identify potential candidates themselves. New partners have joined the EQUAL partnership including the Greek Corporate Social Responsibility network, the UNHCR and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

In those cases, the reception, support and integration of asylum seekers had been increasingly shared by NGOs, local authorities and other agencies, but due to the high number of stakeholders involved, services were overlapping and there was insufficient communication.

Training of those who work with asylum seekers in a professional capacity improves the quality of services provided to them and helps their integration

All DPs that took part in the good practice discussions agreed that working with asylum seekers, whether in the public, private or voluntary sector, required a thorough knowledge and understanding of their specific conditions and needs. By training and guiding those who work with asylum seekers, around 30% of the DPs had included activities to ensure that those working with this particular group were able to provide their clients with the best services and point them to the best opportunities. Ten selected practices provided examples of practitioners that were being trained and guided, included workshops for outreach workers, training sessions for university staff and coaching of those working with asylum seekers. Short training sessions including a variety of topics (e.g. the national asylum process and context, services available to asylum seekers, conflict resolution) provided through different methods (group discussions, case studies, role play) had been quite successful, as well as learning days which provided opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees to meet and discuss with practitioners.

The North London Aspire Development Partnership supports asylum seekers living in four North London boroughs by offering valuable services which aim to empower them to participate and contribute to their host community. The EQUAL partnership aims to develop the leadership capacities of its client directly while creating strong links with the local community through a community leadership training programme. Asylum seekers are encouraged to develop their leadership and motivational skills so that they can be more active and make a contribution to their local communities. First participants learn about regeneration and community policies, and how local, regional, national policies are formulated and implemented. Topics covering leadership theory, personal and motivational skills, communication skills, and team building empowers participants to realise their own potential and provides the motivation to engage and participate in their communities. Participants then have the opportunity to put the skills learned during the training programme into practice through volunteer placements with community organisations. This gives participants a chance to work together with other members of the wider community and to take an active role in local and national issues that are of concern to them.

Awareness raising activities make the wider public aware of asylum seekers' conditions, needs and potential and empower asylum seekers

The main benefits of awareness-raising and improving the interface with the local community related to creating an environment of understanding and empathy, as well as improving the integration and empowerment of asylum seekers. All DPs developed some form of awareness-raising. The nine practices discussed showed that in a few cases, DPs had developed "formal marketing strategies", for example to convince SME managers / owners to offer job placements to asylum seekers through a poster campaign. Activities combining "leisure" with information also

proved very successful, such as sports events, theatre plays and other cultural expressions, activating young people in schools and organising an exhibition and open-door day in a reception centre. In at least two countries, initially small-scale awareness raising activities had important leverage, attracting attention up to national level, e.g. from national parliaments.

A Finnish DP focused on making their city aware of the asylum seekers living in their midst by showing their potential and interest in participating in community life. Asylum seekers prepared an exhibition on their every-day life in a local museum, took part in the UN Day Against Racism (which due to its success was extended from one day to one whole week) and contributed to a fashion show which is now travelling the world. The initially small-scale activities have had a true snow-ball effect with an overwhelming result: asylum seekers feel truly “part of their city” and are no longer considered by the local community as “outsiders”. The project has also caught the attention of the national parliament where parties are lobbying for further rights and support to asylum seekers. Becoming More Visible, as the continuation of the EQUAL partnership is called under Round 2, still places a high focus on awareness-raising. Building on the achievements under the first phase of EQUAL, the Development Partnership is concentrating even more efforts on creating a positive image of asylum seekers.

4. POLICY MESSAGES:

EU policy actors: European Commission; European Parliament; and Member States.

- Basic training or other forms of standard preparation for all those who work with asylum seekers in a professional capacity (public, private or voluntary sector) should form a practical component of the Common European Asylum System.
- The above training or exchanges of experiences should be adapted to the particular context of the host country and be pitched at different levels of complexity according to the roles played and skills required by the employees undergoing the training.
- Awareness raising campaigns about asylum seekers should be organised at EU and national level to change public attitudes. During recent years there has been an increasing hostility towards asylum seekers in Europe, which can be linked to ignorance and asylum seekers being confused with illegal immigrants. There are also more general issues of understanding other cultures. It is very important to make the local community and the wider public aware both of the reason for asylum seekers being in the host society and of the fact that they have the potential to make some very positive contributions to the community, which is often forgotten in the debate. The ERF has been supporting awareness raising actions but there may be scope in putting further efforts into changing public and community attitudes.
- Capacity building activities in the area of asylum work in different national and regional contexts across the EU and for other disadvantaged groups and the practices are already being mainstreamed nationally.
- Transnational work, through good practice events and transnational partnerships, enables the identification of policy solutions that are applicable in different contexts. The good practices identified and selected should be brought to the attention of decision and policy makers as they are of value for taking forward the CEAS.
- The current Directives of the Common European Asylum System (e.g. on a common application process and the qualification of asylum seekers) all include provisions which require increased organisational and institutional capacity from Member States at different levels. There would be scope for the European Commission to provide additional guidance, training or opportunities to exchange experiences between Member States on how to best develop such capacity.

National / regional / local authorities and employers

- Training for all those who work with asylum seekers in a professional capacity whether through public, private or voluntary sector should be seen as standard practice in the same light as diversity training or professional training for work with disabled or other

disadvantaged groups. Asylum seekers are a unique client group, with a very particular set of needs. As a baseline this training should address: diversity/attitudinal training to work with asylum seekers, dispelling myths and misunderstanding of asylum seeker issues, the specific needs of asylum seekers as a client group, the context and causes of migration flows, contextualising asylum seeker needs and information about signposting asylum seekers to additional support services.

- Networks and networking tools substantially improve communication and coordination, thus improving the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of service providers.
- Networks and networking tools contribute to matching asylum seekers to appropriate education, training and employment opportunities. This leads to cost savings as asylum seekers tend to “drop out” less and can become self-sufficient.
- The current Directives of the Common European Asylum System (e.g. on a common application process and the qualification of asylum seekers) all include provisions which require increased organisational and institutional capacity from Member States at different levels. There would be scope for national authorities to monitor whether such capacity is indeed being developed and to put in place a system of quality assurance.
- **The European Social Fund 2007-2013 should include capacity building measures for the integration of asylum seekers as a target group**

Even though the European Parliament made the case for asylum seekers being included as a separate target group, the new European Social Fund regulation does not refer to asylum seekers specifically but rather to the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups in general. However, this should not refrain national and regional authorities, as well as programme and project managers from including asylum seekers in their Operational Programmes, especially when taking into consideration the Fund’s increased focus on institutional and organisational capacity building. The EQUAL projects have showed some interesting approaches to building networks, managing partnerships, training of staff and improving the quality and effectiveness of services.

- **The European Social Fund 2007-2013 should learn from EQUAL’s transnational lessons**

In addition to providing useful lessons that could inform the further development of the Common European Asylum System, the Transnational Partnerships that collaborated in the EQUAL Asylum Seeker theme could also act as examples for the transnational element included in the new European Social Fund. This could relate to the organisation of the partnerships, the work programmes developed and / or the products that were delivered.