

ASPIRING FOR BETTER INTEGRATION

The European Union is increasingly moving towards a common approach to asylum and migration. With the growing numbers of refugees and migrants wishing to make Europe their home it became evident that it was better to join forces on these issues rather than each country pursuing their individual policies. However, when looking at what happens in reality to asylum seekers, the situation in the Member States is still extremely diverse. Some countries operate high quality reception systems, whilst in others, arrangements are much less structured. Asylum seekers are allowed to work straight away in some countries, whilst in others it is practically impossible due to the many restrictions posed on entering the labour market. With EQUAL partnerships focusing on the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers, it is important to understand these differences, as they have a strong impact on the extent to which asylum seekers can actually integrate in their new society.

How well can asylum seekers really integrate in the different Member States? Under the EQUAL transnational activities, eight Development Partnerships (DPs) from six different countries representing a range of organisations working with asylum seekers, came together to look at this question more closely. ASPIRE!, established for this purpose was the largest transnational partnership working with asylum seekers in EQUAL.



Talking, consulting and exchanging are essential components of a successful transnational partnership

The partnership worked on three specific issues in relation to health, education and employment, and orientation and capacity building. For example, two DPs in the transnational partnership experimented with the development of a new job profile for intercultural mediators in the healthcare sector. Often asylum seekers are hesitant to seek medical care because they have language problems or because they do not understand how the system works. The mediator or advisor trained through EQUAL provides information in their native language, accompanies them on medical visits and explains how to make best use of the services available. Transnational working strongly improved the quality of the profiles and their potential to be picked up by others, such as healthcare services, training institutes and public authorities.

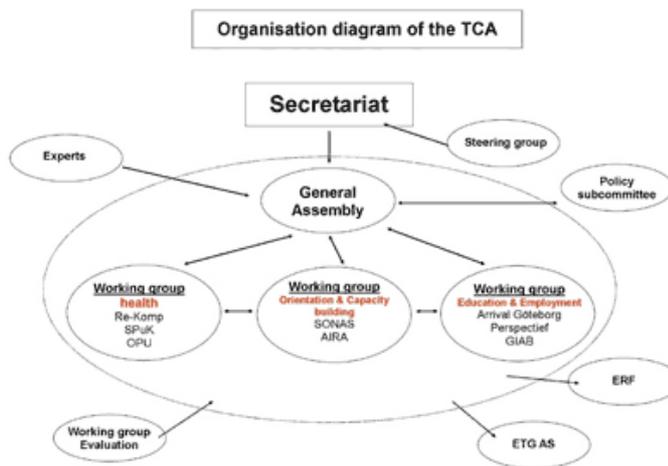
After a lot of hard work and continuous exchanges, the working groups of ASPIRE! came forward with good practices and lessons based on their direct practical experiences. These were then reformulated into sets of recommendations which focused on Health, the NGO sector and Social Inclusion, to be presented in the EU “policy arena”.

“EQUAL is a learning programme. People taking part in transnational work must be eager to learn” says Anders Carlstedt, chairman of the Swedish RE-KOMP DP. “Resources and commitments have come together to create a result, a product to be proud of: our policy recommendations based on hard evidence and in-depth studies. The fact that these results were achieved in a situation which required the participation and agreement of so many, from so many different backgrounds is perhaps the greatest achievement of ASPIRE!”.

TRANSNATIONAL INNOVATION

The partnership's global aim is to "improve the health, well-being and quality of life of asylum seekers". The successful integration of asylum seekers is key to this. From the very start of the transnational adventure the DPs decided that ASPIRE! was to be more than a mere platform for the exchange of good practices at ground level. All partners signed up to a truly "transnational project", which meant that they committed to actively working together to formulate policy recommendations arising out of their practical experiences and learning from EQUAL.

The partners spent substantial time preparing a strategic work programme to ensure timely delivery of the policy recommendations. Clear management and coordination procedures were essential, as working with 8 different DPs from 6 very different national contexts is challenging. ASPIRE! thus set up a General Assembly comprising all staff involved in the transnational work to take major decisions, a Secretariat to deal with its day-to-day management, transnational coordinators to act as main focal points for the many persons involved and the three working groups which would carry out the thematic work.



Aspire!'s organisational structure in a nutshell

A particularly interesting aspect of the transnational partnership was that it also included the active participation of a New Member State, in the form of an NGO from the Czech Republic, as well as the support from ECRE, the European umbrella organisation bringing together 76 NGOs working with refugees and exiles. A truly impressive collection of partners, but not always easily manageable. Not only did the partners meet some language problems (English, or rather "Euroenglish" as the partners define it, was the working language chosen), they also had to understand each other's cultural differences and working methods. Results are much easier achieved and of a better quality when you know and appreciate the people you are working with".

In addition to the six large-scale meetings involving all DP partners, ASPIRE! realised that direct and focused contacts were necessary to enable the working groups carrying out the thematic tasks to work efficiently. In order to catch the real "on-the-ground" experiences, staff exchanges were organised for those working directly with asylum seekers, as well as study visits to brainstorm on specific subjects part of the thematic work. For example, the working group concentrating on capacity building and orientation, arranged for Portuguese staff members of the DP's information centre to "shadow" his Irish "colleagues", the outreach workers. For both parties, the experience was extremely valuable. Whilst the Portuguese practitioners worked on the creation of a one-stop-shop for asylum seekers, the Irish focused on getting in touch with asylum seekers outside the reception structures by sending staff all over the country to meet them. It became clear that both approaches had their benefits and disadvantages, and the strengths and weaknesses of each could be identified.

An evaluator from "the outside world" was appointed to monitor not only progress and results, but also to assess the full transnational collaboration process. Partners were regularly interviewed or otherwise requested to comment on their transnational experiences. And responses were not always equally positive... People were initially quite sceptical as to whether the transnational work would actually have any benefits to their national activities, and commented on several communication problems and cultural differences. However, the final evaluation showed that mutual understanding had grown drastically, mainly thanks to the many opportunities for "live" exchanges. The participants also felt enriched by their increased knowledge of asylum seekers in different national contexts. Partners were very proud of the policy recommendations that were first presented at an EQUAL asylum seekers European conference in Dublin in 2004 attended by more than 200 persons including representatives from each New Member State.

MAINSTREAMING LESSONS FOR THE EU POLICY ARENA

From the outset partners agreed that the main remit of ASPIRE! was to produce policy recommendations and convince politicians that the integration of asylum seekers was something positive and beneficial, not something to be avoided. It was essential to ensure that such recommendations would be convincing, credible and backed up with hard evidence. Not an easy task! Something which is very successful in one country, may not have the same success, or may simply not be allowed, in other national contexts. And creating an evidence base is fine when counting numbers of participants, or checking how many asylum seekers successfully found employment, but what about the extremely important “softer” effects of integration on people’s motivation, self-confidence and mental well-being? And finally, even when coming up with a set of satisfactory recommendations, how to best formulate and present these to such a difficult, and often reluctant, audience as policy makers?

Intensive collaboration and exchanges were necessary to test all the evidence and its potential use in other contexts. Approaches which seemed typical and exclusive to a particular country proved to be, after further examination, easily applicable elsewhere through a few relatively simple adaptations. Soft impacts were identified through in-depth discussions with asylum seekers and first-hand evaluation of their experiences. And finally, ASPIRE! called in external communication and media expertise to make sure that the policy recommendations would be appropriately formulated to successfully enter the EU policy arena. An investment that is now definitely proving its real value.

After three years of continuous research, exchanges and other hard work, ASPIRE! has been able to crystallise the results of the thematic studies carried out by the working groups into the following set of policy recommendations:

Strengthening the capacity of the NGO sector is essential in order to respond to the real needs of asylum seekers. NGOs are extremely flexible and adaptable, able to react fast to unexpected needs and situations, and are often more easily trusted than public services, as they are considered to be “neutral” service providers. NGOs have direct links to on-the-ground activity as they draw on a broad range of voluntary and community based support. NGOs should therefore be considered active and long-term partners in information provision and other services to asylum seekers, and be involved in the planning, learning and decision-making processes of public authorities.

The creation of new forms of employment in the health sector not only improves the mental well-being of asylum seekers and helps them to become more empowered, but also gives them a real chance to find a job in very restrictive labour markets and improves the quality of healthcare standards. Treatment costs and wrong diagnoses are strongly reduced, asylum seeker clients feel understood and more at ease to use the health services offered and health institutions understand much better the background and cultural differences of their foreign clients. Employing asylum seekers as advisors or mediators acting as a bridge between newcomers and their new society is extremely effective in combating discrimination and encouraging integration.

Integration of asylum seekers into wider social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives helps to avoid their exclusion from both the new and their home society. Asylum seekers face the most discrimination of all vulnerable groups. They are often prevented from contributing and belonging to society, and activities to help their inclusion and integration do not sufficiently take into account their needs and specific conditions in both the host country and country of origin. Member States should therefore explicitly include asylum seekers in policies and approaches to foreign aid, social inclusion and combating discrimination and, what is even more important, make sure that these are consistent and coordinated with their asylum programmes.

“Our work provides a method for policy and decision-makers to follow” indicates John Kearns from the SONAS Ireland DP “It shows how a large group is able to work together in a structured and strategic, but flexible manner, towards realising its goals”.

The policy recommendations have already been introduced to the wider public on several occasions, for example in Dublin in March 2004 (mentioned above), to an audience of practitioners and policy-makers from across Europe, and in Sweden in April 2005, where ASPIRE! aimed to further fine-tune and strengthen the messages they wish to convey. The

transnational partners organised a “Policy Week” in May 2005, during which they visited high-level policy shapers in Brussels, including representatives of the European Parliament and the European Commission.

At national level, politicians have already started listening. The concept of training asylum seekers to become international health advisors may not have had such a positive impact in



The team getting ready to present the policy recommendations

Sweden if the approach wasn't backed up by equally promising results from similar experiences in Germany. At present, health services in different regions of both Sweden and Germany are exploring the possibilities of permanently introducing this new function into their service package. The umbrella organisation of county councils in Sweden is also looking at possibilities to have the new job profile adopted by all its members.

ASPIRE! (Asylum Seekers Participation is the Result)

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