

## ASYLUM SEEKERS SHOULD BE INTEGRATED ... ASAP!

### THE INTEGRATION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS – A COMMON CAUSE

February 2005 heralded the beginning of a new transnational partnership: **Asylum Seekers Active Partnership (ASAP)**. At that time, representatives of 14 countries came together in Turku, Finland, concerned with, and sometimes already professionally involved in, the integration of asylum seekers in society. These delegates explored common cause in what they were trying to achieve in their national work and what they could achieve together transnationally. Eventually six countries joined hands, having identified shared interests and routes to assist the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers in Europe: Austria (InPower), Finland (Becoming More Visible), Italy (Integra 2004), Lithuania (In Corpore), Poland (MUR) and Scotland (ATLAS).

The partners came together two years into the implementation of the Reception Directive setting minimum standards on the reception of asylum seekers[1], one of the first legislative instruments to be officially agreed as part of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Together, the members of the ASAP partnership saw themselves as advocating and supporting the implementation of such crucial provisions as access to employment and vocational training that are enshrined in the Directive. Given that in many partner countries the integration of asylum seekers was a novelty, organisational capacity building, networking and awareness-raising were considered key objectives of the ASAP partnership. This eventually resulted in the organisation of a staff exchange programme, the production of best practices on how to empower asylum seekers and a toolkit for developing models of accredited qualifications for those working with this target group across the EU. These ASAP products have been particularly well received by partnerships members and external stakeholders due to their innovative, but also adaptive qualities: 'The products are constantly changing, being improved, to suit the changing climate and constraints of working with such a diverse target group.' (Jim Anderson, Atlas, Scotland)

### THE RECIPE AND INGREDIENTS OF AN 'ACTIVE' PARTNERSHIP

*'As a large partnership it took us some time to establish ways and procedures to enable us to work productively together but we feel now that we have established a true 'active partnership'. Our products are the result of sharing knowledge, ideas and best practices.'* (ASAP Partnership promotional materials). The goals that the partnership set itself were many; the work programme was therefore an ambitious one. To avoid that geographical distance, national commitments and other issues would undermine or slow down the work of the transnational partnership, a tailored working method was needed. The members eventually agreed that *'a flexible and thematic approach'* was the most appropriate and effective way forward for the partnership: its recipe for success (Minutes of ASAP Final Conference). A working group was created for each theme and was given fifteen months to develop its main product(s). Progress on one theme was therefore not overly dependent on that of another theme or working group. As members with a similar interest and expertise were assigned to the same working group, the resources available to the partnership were maximised.

In terms of the ingredients of this 'active' partnership, *'we identified six major areas where we felt development needed to happen and these areas became our core workgroups'* (ASAP Partnership, promotional materials). A first working group was set up to disseminate good practice. The working group members chose a *'simple and attractive dissemination vehicle'*, i.e. a newsletter (Kenny Hamilton, British Red Cross, Glasgow). The paper and electronic versions that were produced throughout the life of the partnership were positively received by the members, allowing them to stay informed of the progress of other working groups and of the partnership as a whole.

Under the banner of *'Six nations, one goal'*, the second working group aimed to foster positive views and attitudes vis-à-vis asylum seekers and, in doing so, promote the activities of the partnership. Concerned with the prejudices about asylum seekers in the Member States, the

partnership set out to sensitise the public about the value of asylum and about *'the enriching contribution that asylum seekers make'* (Goran Vojvodic, InPower, Austria). Next to a set of activities and products which were realised in all six countries, such as maximising the output of International Refugee Week and organising press conferences, festivals, workshops, advertising campaigns, networks and theatre, the second working group also developed promotional activities responsive to the situation in each country (e.g. City Hope Walks in Finland).

The goal of working group 3 was to produce guidelines for developing a (trans-national) accredited qualification for those working with asylum seekers. It hereby recognised the EU-wide need for capacity building of those individuals and/or organisations involved in furthering the socio-vocational training of asylum seekers. This need was perceived as particularly high in EU Member States where the arrival of asylum seekers constituted a relatively new phenomenon or where the increase in their numbers resulted in the (over)stretching of institutional resources. The production of toolkits on the knowledge and skills that these professionals should acquire and on the methods and techniques on transferring these was seen as essential for ensuring similar standards of reception and integration of asylum seekers arriving in the European Union. These toolkits were to allow partner countries, but also other EU Member States, *'to develop qualifications based on their specific educational structure and asylum procedures'* (Maggie Lennon, The Bridges Programme, Scotland).

What a better way to cross borders to promote the integration of asylum seekers in Europe than the worldwide web, was the thought that lay at the inception of the fourth working group. Through the creation of a virtual space <[www.asylumseekersineurope.eu](http://www.asylumseekersineurope.eu)>, asylum



seekers and those working with this target group were provided with relevant information and tools, such as details on the nature and scale of the problems that asylum seekers face in (particular regions of) Europe, the type of legislation and procedures affecting their status and reception in the host country, and *'statistical portraits'* of the asylum seeker population in the member countries. In addition, the website was *'to provide the visitor with a comparative analysis of the systems of asylum reception in the each country'* of the ASAP partnership and to *'share relevant information and best practices'*. The future aim of the website is *'to extend these different types of information to other EU countries'*, not represented in the ASAP partnership. (Fabio Pollice, Integra 2004, Italy)

The idea that asylum seekers are not merely beneficiaries, but also active agents in their socio-vocational integration was at the centre of the fifth working group. Members of this group set out to produce materials to support the empowerment of asylum seekers. They agreed that the sense of dependency or disempowerment that asylum seekers experience in relation to the decision process on their asylum application should not be extended in the delivery of services to this group. Instead, the (coping) skills and knowledge that asylum seekers dispose off, and often evidence through their flight to, and settlement in, the new host society, are to be boosted by those working professionally with them. In order to produce a manual with best practices on empowering asylum seekers, the working group *gathered examples of good practice from reception centres, adult education centres, NGOs and employment organisations'*. It explored *'how to plan an empowering practice, such as listening to asylum seekers' views and take these into account in planning'*. (Teija Enoranta, Becoming more Visible, Finland)

Finally, working group 6 shed light on another important element of the Common European Asylum System, i.e. the legal framework in which the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers is to occur in each of the Member States. This developed a comparative study of the six countries involved in ASAP, resulting in information on *'the provision for national asylum legislation, procedures, accommodation, detention, legal aid, the right to work during the asylum procedure and more'* (Renata Kules, State Border Guard Service, Lithuania). The findings were to be presented in book format.

Next to this thematic approach, transnational staff exchanges have also been another a major feature of ASAP, *'where staff working with asylum seekers in each of the six countries have been encouraged and assisted to visit different countries to observe and learn from the work taking place'*. Over the course of 2006 and 2007, 106 persons working with asylum seekers participated in the Staff Exchange Programme, such as teachers and other educational staff, lawyers, social workers, reception centre counsellors, health care personnel, careers advisers, volunteers and students. During country visits of three to five days, participants were presented with a *'general*

*overview on asylum seeker (and refugee) matters, policies, services and actors of reception of asylum seekers and the asylum application procedures, participated in visits to the different partners of the project [...], NGOs and reception centres working with asylum seekers and refugees'. (ASAP partnership promotional materials)*

The Staff Exchange Programme was not only a great learning experience for the members of the partnership, but also for other stakeholders involved: *'The staff exchange element of the partnership has provided an insight at local level to the workings with the target group across the six countries. It has also led to many of the ideas across the partnership being integrated into local projects'* (Jim Anderson, response to ETG5 questionnaire on TCAs).

## **PRESENTING THE RESULTS: THE FINAL CONFERENCE IN WARSAW**

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ASAP's intensive years of partnership building and work culminated into a final conference in the spring of 2007. As the cherry on the cake, this event was to offer the members of the transnational partnership the opportunity to disseminate nationally and internationally the key findings of their working groups and the four main products that sprung from those. As to the venue for this final dissemination event, Warsaw was picked – the capital of Poland, where the EQUAL programme played an important role in pushing the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers higher on the political agenda. The conference aimed to convince policy-makers and practitioners of the relevance and transferability of the lessons learnt and to provide them with the tools to take the work of the partnership forward at both the national and international level.

In the morning of 11 June 2007, the conference centre in Warsaw was buzzing with activity as nearly 100 participants arrived consisting of partnership members and other stakeholders, such as teachers and principals of adult education centres and directors from reception centres. The event was launched with the presentation of the final report of ASAP by the partnership's secretary, Jim Anderson, and the six working group leaders. This presentation was followed by invited speakers, who informed conference delegates of the main conclusions of the European Policy Forum on the Reception of Asylum seekers in Sweden in May 2007 (Christian Rabergh, European thematic group on asylum seekers), on the challenges of refugee integration in the EU (Lloyd Dakin, UNHCR's Regional Representative for Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Poland) and on the links between asylum and economic migration (Nigel Harris, University College London). During the afternoon, several workshops were held in which the partnership's key findings and products were explored in greater depth.

The key products of ASAP that were introduced at the conference were:

- Book: Empowering Asylum Seekers - Developing Good Practice (Finland in charge of publication);
- Book: Developing Models for Effective Accredited Qualifications to Build the Capacity of Those Working with Asylum Seekers Across the EU (Scotland in charge of publication);
- DVD: Guidelines to the Asylum Procedure in Austria, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and the UK (Scotland), (Lithuania in charge of publication);
- DVD: ASAP Final Report, (Poland in charge of publication).

The presentation of the products evidenced to conference delegates the extensive work that the development partnerships had put in this transnational initiative. For the development partnerships, it showcased their national as well as our transnational activities. Pauli Heikkinen from the Finnish project 'Becoming More Visible', for example, commented that the conference *'added value to our own project'* in the sense that the project's involvement in the transnational activities had clearly *'brought credit to our national work'*. Furthermore, the final conference had succeeded in bringing key stakeholders in the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers in Finland together, *'getting them to sit at the same table'*. As this had so far failed to happen on national soil, Heikkinen expressed the hope that the exchanges at the conference would *'form a good base for further planning of tailor-made courses in order to activate asylum seekers in Finland'*.

## FUTURE COLLABORATION THROUGH AND BEYOND ASAP

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As the end of EQUAL approaches rapidly, the final conference was also considered vital in identifying future collaboration opportunities, funding options and other ways in which ASAP's work could be taken forward. The potential for future collaboration with ASAP and/or its members was, among other things, explored through an electronic polling exercise which invited conference delegates to cast their views on ASAP during the course of the conference.

Petri Uusikyla, from Net Effect Ltd. organising the poll, found that of those attending one third were project staff, another third public officers, and a fifth NGO representatives. Gauging the level of involvement of conference delegates with the transnational partnership, the poll found that more than half of those attending had been occasionally (24.7%) to regularly (28.8%) involved with ASAP. A third of the delegates had not read ASAP material (21.9%) or had not heard of ASAP (8.2%) before. More than half of those attending the conference indicated that ASAP brought value to their national work (57.2%). While only 5.2% concluded that ASAP could not contribute to their national activities, one third was still in doubt. The fact that a third of the delegates had had no or limited contact with the partnership and was still getting acquainted with their work and products may explain this result. In general, two thirds of those attending were highly satisfied with the work of ASAP (68%). Again a quarter of the participants (26.4%) were unsure and only 5.6% quite disappointed.

It was therefore of little surprise that nearly all participants (94.4%) indicated that they would continue to work with the network developed by ASAP, either through (establishing) a new project (29.2%), drawing upon informal networks whenever the opportunity or need arises (20.8%), using internet discussion platforms (13.9%), maintaining bilateral relations between countries (16.7%) or other means. The findings of the poll confirmed the hope of the ASAP members: *'Our collaboration has produced some innovative results which will be of value to asylum seekers, those working with them and those making policy. We hope that the products we have created together through sharing knowledge, ideas and best practice will be incorporated into mainstream policies and help the integration of asylum seekers in all Member States.'* (ASAP Partnership promotion materials)s)

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