

YOUNG ASYLUM SEEKERS PAVE THE WAY FOR OTHERS – TO THE TOP!

There are 300 steps to the top. At least to get to the top of the Kapuzinerberg – one of the main sights in Salzburg, Austria. From this mountain, one could – and did – have a spectacular view of the entire city and its beautiful surroundings a few years ago. The 2 kilometre-long hiking path that leads to the top has, however, been closed for years as many of the wooden steps and bridges that made it possible to climb the sometimes rather steep mountain were in disrepair, which made the path very dangerous to use. But not any more! Through a collaborative project between the EQUAL Partnership EPIMA 2 and the Austrian Alpine Club ('Alpenverein') the path is open again, to the joy of many people from Salzburg and tourists alike.

"This collaborative project has really given us a unique possibility to make Austrian citizens aware of who asylum seekers are and at the same time give asylum seekers an opportunity to get some practical work experience! During our work on the path, many inhabitants of Salzburg and tourists have come up to us, talked to us and thanked us for our work. They have been really curious and enthusiastic about who we are and about the project – and they are very keen on using the path again!" Christa Grabher-Mayer, co-ordinator of the local EPIMA 2 module in Salzburg, explains.

The renovation project has received a lot of media attention in the Salzburg area and has been covered both in TV and newspapers. The word about the much appreciated work by asylum seekers participating in activities organised by EPIMA 2 and the Alpine Club has been widely spread. The local governor and a city council representative have also visited the site and helped out with the work themselves. The work was, though, only possible for the asylum seekers, all aged between 17 and 25, to do as members of the Alpine Club. According to Austrian law, asylum seekers are allowed to start working three months after they have lodged their asylum application. This may sound very promising – if only it were not for the guidelines on the implementation of the law. This document clarifies that asylum seekers are only allowed so-called 'seasonal work', which makes employment possibilities very limited. Such work is only available in a few regions in the east of Austria, for example picking grapes in the wine regions in the autumn. There is, however, yet another restriction added to seasonal work, which is that asylum seekers can only take on these jobs if no citizen of the EU Member States has applied. The result of these two restrictions? It is almost impossible for asylum seekers to work in Austria.

Austria receives around 20,000 asylum seekers per year. Of these, around 800 are unaccompanied minors, i.e. asylum seekers who are younger than 18 years old and come on their own. 80 (or 10%) are even younger than 14 years old. Asylum seekers are allowed to attend compulsory schooling (until age 15), but after that they are pretty much left on their own. "EPIMA 2 is focussed on helping young asylum seekers aged 15 to 25 get some education and practical work experience and keep them active during their waiting time. It is not unusual that it takes five years or sometimes even longer time to get the final decision on the asylum application" Elisabeth Freithofer, Project Manager of EPIMA 2, explains. "Just think about what it is like for these young asylum seekers, who have left everything behind in their home country, are not able to study or work or perhaps even learn the language. They do not get any opportunity to develop their skills and competences," she adds.

NOT IN THE SAME BOAT, BUT ON THE SAME BIKE

"She came over to my place last Friday, and we had dinner together and talked, and it was really nice!" Jasray Erdene¹ from Mongolia talks about her Austrian friend, who she met through the

¹ Not real name.

intercultural tandem initiative, carried out by EPIMA 2 and the College for Child Pedagogy in Vienna. "This project is an excellent possibility for young asylum seekers not only to learn German through speaking with young Austrian people of the same age, but also to find out about Austrian culture and make lasting friends," Elisabeth Freithofer explains.

In Vienna, EPIMA 2 organises eight months of education and practical work experiences for asylum seekers aged 15 to 25. During the first five months, the asylum seekers participate in courses on 'basic' subjects such as German, maths, social sciences, history, computer skills etc., which is followed by three months of practical work experience either at a radio station or an institute for the training of professionals in the restaurant sector. The asylum seekers had 25 hours of classes per week. Of these, 14 hours were devoted to German language, where the students also could choose different themes they wanted to discuss. "We talked about when Austrians celebrate their holidays, the school system – because I so want to go to school – family structures, pets, political parties and learnt how to write letters," Jasray Erdene says. "When I did my trainee period, I learnt how to cook Austrian food – and I have cooked that at home too! We first got the recipe and discussed what the different ingredients were, and then cooked, and then I brought the recipe home and practiced!"

In addition, the asylum seekers also participate in the intercultural tandem initiative Jasray Erdene talked about, i.e. organised meetings between asylum seekers and students at the College for Child Pedagogy in Vienna. The theme to be discussed was decided before each meeting, which meant that the asylum seekers had a possibility to practice the specific vocabulary with their teacher beforehand. The asylum seekers and students got to choose what subject they wanted to discuss, and split up in small groups to talk for 2.5 to 3 hours each time. "It was so much fun!" Jasray Erdene says. "We did not even take a break because we had so much to talk about! And I really learnt a lot! In addition to speaking German, we learnt about Austrian food, habits and traditions".

Jasray Erdene's teacher explains that there was a huge interest in the courses, which are organised for groups of 12 to be efficient, over 50 persons wanted to participate. In order to select the participants, some basic language tests were arranged to try to group pupils with similar language knowledge. The fields chosen for the traineeships were ones in which the skills learnt could be applied in almost any country in the world, for example cooking.. They also provided a good possibility to get in contact with Austrians and help the asylum seekers integrate into their new society.

The EQUAL Partnership EPIMA 2 is spread over six different cities. According to the regional opportunities available for asylum seekers to gain work experience, the Partnership has developed different modules in each city. Each module has an integrated approach including education, work experience and cultural activities. The red thread throughout the regions is education in basic subjects including German, maths, English, geography, social sciences and discussions on the Austrian culture and society. On the other hand, the work practice is region specific. In Graz in the south there is landscape gardening, while in Vienna, in the east, the project offers radio broadcasting or practice in a culinary profession. In Mödling (close to Vienna) the asylum seekers can do their internships in the social sector by caring for elderly. In Burgenland, in the centre of Austria, a course on woodworking is arranged, whereas in Salzburg in the north the asylum seekers get the opportunity to work on the 'intercultural paths'. Finally, in Linz an individualised approach has been adopted, as the group of asylum seekers participating is quite heterogeneous with different levels of German knowledge and education.

Georg Reheir, a kitchen chef in Linz, was one of the Austrian employers who offered a trainee place to an asylum seeker from Nigeria. "Abeni Nyong was really nice, spoke German very well and neither I nor my colleagues experienced any problems at all," he says. "I think that it is terrible that asylum seekers are not allowed to work and I really welcome this initiative so that young asylum seekers at least can get some work experience. Before I took on the asylum seeker, I checked with my five kitchen staff members that they were OK with taking the asylum seeker on board, since we are a small business and work very closely together. But they were only positive towards it, and we would definitely welcome another asylum seeker as a trainee if this would be possible."

EPIMA 2 aimed at arranging courses for 150 persons, but in May 2006, half way through the project, 111 asylum seekers had already participated in the six modules. “We are really pleased with the results,” Elisabeth Freithofer says. “But best of all is to see the participating asylum seekers gain confidence, develop their skills and competences, and make new Austrian friends.”

LET’S STAY TOGETHER

Why change a winning concept? When EQUAL Round 1 became EQUAL Round 2, EPIMA became EPIMA 2. The network of partner organisations that had been created in Round 1 pretty much remained the same to keep the momentum of collaboration that had been created in Round 1. “It takes time and effort to establish an efficient network,” Elisabeth Freithofer says. “Only two organisations left our network since Round 1 – one organisation because of budgetary issues and the other because of internal re-organisation.”

“One very important actor to have on board is the Ministry,” Elisabeth continues. “Having them as a partner ensures that our results are spread directly to relevant policy makers. In Austria, questions in relation to social integration and employment for asylum seekers are, however, handled by several different Ministries. During Round 1, the Ministry of Interior participated in our Partnership. In Round 2, we asked the Ministry of Education instead, as they seemed more relevant to the issues we are dealing with. They even have an intercultural department, something we find quite important.” The Ministry is involved as a strategic partner in the project, and is not in charge of running any parts of the project, but has been involved to easily inform relevant people at national policy level. In addition to the Ministry, EPIMA involves two other strategic partners, which are a Trade Union and the Chamber of Commerce.

The main partners who collaborate to carry out the project include the Integrationshaus (‘Integration house’), which is responsible for co-ordinating the content and finances of all the six different modules, and also for running the module in Vienna. For each of the six modules, one partner has been appointed as local co-ordinator. Verein Zebra (Zebra Organisation) runs the module in Graz, the Diakonie (the protestant welfare organisation) is in charge of the module in Mödling, in Salzburg the organisation SOS Kinderdorf (‘SOS children’s village’) co-ordinates the local module, and in Linz and Burgenland the modules are run by the local Berufsförderungsinstitut and Volkshochschule education institutes). “Asylcoordination”, the umbrella organisation of refugee organisations in Austria is primarily involved to help spread the results at the end of the project period. It has been important to give each of the partners a very concrete and specific role as the project is carried out in a number of cities in different parts of Austria. Each of the partners does not, however, work in a void, but meetings are organised involving all partners to discuss the overall approach and work progress. “For us it has been particularly important to not always organise the meetings in one city, for example in Vienna, but for all partners to visit each city at least once,” Elisabeth Freithofer says. “We try to organise the meetings in connection with events organised in the cities, for example at the end of a course or module, where the partners also get an opportunity to meet the asylum seekers who participated in the local module,” she adds.

In addition to the partner organisations, other relevant external actors have also been involved, depending on the specifics of the modules in each city. For example, in Salzburg EPIMA 2 has established a good relationship with the Alpine Club. Being able to collaborate on the hiking path project was a success in itself – the Alps Organisation had been considered to be on the conservative side, and getting involved in a project with the aim to help asylum seekers might not have been quite evident. “From the start, they were really enthusiastic, though!” Christa Grabher-Mayer, co-ordinator of the module in Salzburg explains. “It has been very nice working together.”

RECORD WORK

On 3 May, an ‘open day’ was organised in Mödling, where music, traditional food, presentations of the project and what the participating asylum seekers had learnt were on the agenda. The elderly, who the asylum seekers had met during their trainee time in the social sector, were invited as well as organisations such as LION and Caritas. There is also life after EQUAL, and the EPIMA 2 project workers are highly committed to already get organisations on board that can

help with financing and organising activities in the future. Not only are the project workers committed, though. At the event in Mödling, the elderly, on their own initiative, told the representatives of the participating organisations about the importance to help finance similar activities in the future. This, if anything, shows that the project already has been very successful in its approach to spread awareness about asylum seekers and the challenges they meet.

They are also in Mödling on 3 May 2006. They? Yes, the asylum seekers who did their work experience at a radio broadcasting station in Vienna at the beginning of the year. During their time at the radio station, their programmes were broadcast in the Vienna area, and now they are visiting the six other Austrian cities where EPIMA 2 has arranged modules for asylum seekers to record their work. They interview project workers, asylum seekers and other people who are involved in the project or come in contact with the participants through the different activities. The radio recordings will be an excellent way to promote the project and the already very positive results achieved so far. All radio recordings will be available on the EPIMA 2 website for anyone to listen to at any time.

Radio recordings are not the only way the project approach and results are documented, though. To ensure that valuable experiences are not lost, specific material is developed for each module that can be used in future projects as well as to try to impact on policy makers and inform policy and legislative changes. For instance, for the tandem project in Vienna, a map has been developed, which includes suggestions of themes for discussion, practice sheets where the asylum seekers get to do exercises that will help them learn the specific vocabulary for the theme of the day, and a section called 'Tandem Diary'. After each meeting, the asylum seekers fill in this part of the map with their thoughts on the theme that they discussed with their Austrian peers, and at the end, all participants got a copy of the diaries – as a nice reminder and memory of what they had done. This map is a very useful tool that can be used in similar activities in the future.

In some cities, the memory of EQUAL will, though, be of a more concrete and long-lasting nature – also to the general public. The renovated hiking path to the Kapuzinerberg in Salzburg is of course one example. Not only will the inhabitants and tourists in Salzburg be able to use the reopened path, but they will also through media coverage and personal meetings with the asylum seekers have their own memories of those who made this possible, and perhaps a changed perception of who asylum seekers are. Christa Grabher-Mayer says: "I am really overwhelmed by all the media interest in our project. Normally, I would have to contact newspapers and try to get them to accept articles about what we are doing – but now they contact us, visit the project and write about it on their own initiative! We have even been on TV. I also always carry leaflets about the project with me when we work on the path, which I give to people who come up and talk to us. The Alpine Club has also, on their own initiative, spread the news about the project to other Alpine Clubs in the area and even in Germany!"

In Graz EPIMA 2 will also have left its mark. Within the framework of the landscape gardening project, in which asylum seekers learn about and get practical experience through the maintenance of parks, planting flowers etc., an artist has been involved. Under her supervision, the participating asylum seekers are creating a metal sculpture, which will be placed in one of the parks. The sculpture will have intercultural features and chime in the wind. Also from the Mödling project there will be visual material available. In addition to a documentation map on the work with the elderly, a photo series of asylum seekers visiting the elderly will be created.

EPIMA 2 has also developed education material for trainers and teachers, and guidelines for NGOs and other organisations on lessons learnt during EQUAL on what is important to think of when working with asylum seekers. "But we must never forget that even though they are asylum seekers, our participants are also youth – and some things are simply 'youth' specific. Many issues are in fact not very different to what young Austrian adults are experiencing," Elisabeth Freithofer says.

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