

## FACING THE CHALLENGE

“Before EQUAL there was nothing!” Louiza Papaloizou, Project Manager for the EQUAL Partnership Equality and Solidarity for Asylum Seekers – Guarantee for Employment and Freedom, explains. In Cyprus, the concept of developing measures to assist non-Cypriots integrating into the society, either these are asylum seekers, political refugees or migrant workers, is quite recent. The possibility for non-Cypriots to stay and work in the country was opened up in the beginning of the 1990s, when restrictive immigration policies were abandoned in order to meet labour shortages, but only on a temporary basis for a maximum period of four years. Then they would return to their home country. At least this was the thought. Because short-term work and temporary stay became the guiding principle for immigration policy, no measures to assist the integration of non-Cypriots were ever set up. However, those who came made friends, started families, and their employers wanted them to stay longer. The initial period of four years was extended to a maximum of six years, but still the idea was that these people would return to their country of origin. Why was there such a strong focus on ‘temporary’ one might ask. Louiza Papaloizou explains: “The still unresolved problem, with the division of the country into a Greek-Cypriot part and a Turkish-Cypriot part since 1974, is one very important factor for this policy. Demographic change is still a very sensitive subject”.

Towards the end of the 1990s the first asylum application was lodged. At first there were only rather low annual numbers of applications, but when it became clear that Cyprus would be able to join the European Union (EU), the numbers increased drastically: from around 300 to 3,000 applications per year. But the legal framework and administrative structure to process these applications did not exist. In fact, Cyprus did not pass its first Refuge Law until 2000, which since then has been amended several times, and the asylum structure established by the Cypriot government only started processing applications in 2002. This led to a huge backlog of applications to process, which in turn resulted in that Cyprus in 2006 had an estimated number of 12,000 pending asylum applications. This was the highest proportional rate of the total population of a country in the entire EU.

Louiza Papaloizou explains: “Asylum seekers in Cyprus are, in theory, allowed to work and get welfare benefits. This may sound very good, but in practice the government has restricted the access of asylum seekers to employment only in two sectors, namely agriculture and farming. Asylum seekers have access to welfare only if no job in these sectors is available. The limited number of jobs in the eligible sectors, combined with unfavourable working conditions usually prevailing in such environments and restrictive policies regarding welfare provisions, often force asylum seekers to live in unacceptable conditions, lacking even the basic means for survival.” She continues: “Measures to help their integration have yet to be set up – not even Greek language courses, which is the basic means to be able to integrate on equal terms into our society, are provided. Also, since asylum seeking is such a recent phenomenon here, many Cypriots do not even know what an asylum seeker is. It is important for us to show a face, a human being behind this concept and make people aware of why they are here – which is not to exploit the system. Many have in fact fled from their home country with extremely traumatic experiences behind them and have come here to get a better future – or rather a future.”

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

“The interest from employers was huge”, Kyriakos Angelides from Cyprus Employers and Industrialist Federation (OEB), the main Cypriot employers’ organisation, explains enthusiastically. “I just sent a fax to our members, and within days we had almost 80 placements available – for the 50 asylum seekers we had asked trainee places for.”

Two to four month internships are available to asylum seekers in the third phase of the comprehensive programme the Cypriot EQUAL Partnership ‘Equality and Solidarity for Asylum

Seekers – Guarantee for Employment and Freedom’ has developed. First the asylum seekers participate in a Greek language course and a course on Cypriot and European culture and society (phase 1). This is followed by vocational training (phase 2), before they finally get some much wanted practical experience of working in a company (phase 3). Three different paths of vocational training and internships are provided: as chef assistant, air conditioning and refrigeration assistant technician; or secretarial assistant. In particular the first two professions lack staff in Cyprus, which was a major impetus to train asylum seekers in these fields.

“As no Greek language courses, or any other courses or training for that matter, was available to asylum seekers before this EQUAL project, we wanted to develop an as comprehensive programme as possible – there was really nothing to build on,” Louiza Papaloizou, Project Manager, explains. Unavailability of integration support to asylum seekers, however, also created another problem – how to select 50 persons who would be able to participate in the programme out of 12,000? Just pick 50 people! you might say. For one of the main partners in particular, fairness and equal opportunities are not just words to be taken easily. The chairman, who was also one of the founders of KISA (Action for Equality, Support and Antiracism), Doros Polykarpou, clarifies: “KISA was the first organisation in Cyprus that worked with immigrants and asylum seekers. We started in 1998 and our plan was to act as a lobbying and campaigning organisation, but we soon realised that there was actually no responsible State authority to try to impact on and inform, but that there was instead a massive need for direct support and assistance to asylum seekers and immigrants. We therefore changed our approach and started out with legal aid and social advice under the European Refugee Fund. For us, EQUAL was an excellent opportunity to also be able to help asylum seekers into the labour market and facilitate their social integration.”

KISA has since the beginning spent years on building up a trustful relationship with asylum seekers. “This is the place where we go to get help with anything,” Akua Arhin<sup>1</sup>, an asylum seeker from Ghana, says. “It is a very important organisation to us.” To be able to maintain the trust between KISA and asylum seekers, and to ensure a fair and transparent selection of participants, a Working Group for the selection of participants was set up, involving KISA staff, volunteers and asylum seekers. It was decided that this group would not be responsible for selecting participants, but for agreeing on the framework for the selection process. This included dealing with issues such as how to best inform asylum seekers about the project, how to reach them (not all speak English) and criteria for selecting participants. A number of selection criteria were agreed on, including gender, fair representation between different countries of origin, at least some knowledge of English, different age groups, people with different levels of education, those with and without family members, and asylum seekers living in different cities in Cyprus. It was also agreed that people from countries with severe human rights violations would be prioritised.

3,000 leaflets about the project were distributed amongst asylum seekers, and ten information meetings were organised. Five meetings, each in a different language, took place in each of the two main cities Nicosia and Limassol. 50 asylum seekers were able to participate in each of the meetings. The interest was massive. Finally, a list of 50 asylum seekers was compiled, which was agreed with the Ministry of Interior, another of the partners in the EQUAL project.

At the beginning of November 2005 Greek language courses had been organised for 25 participants in each of the two cities Nicosia and Limassol. “For us this was really a golden opportunity,” Akua Arhin says. “70 hours of Greek is not much, but it is so much better than nothing. I have tried to continue on my own,” Fahima Mahwash<sup>1</sup> from Pakistan says. “I get books and read. I do not want to forget what I have learnt.” Changeez Fardis<sup>1</sup>, Iran, agrees. “I tried to find courses on my own before, but they are all so expensive – it simply is not possible to participate. In our language course, the participants had waited for a decision for very different time periods; from three months to eight years. A man who had waited for eight years had learnt some Greek on his own, but had not learnt how to write and was really eager to participate. We were all very eager to participate”, Fahima Mahwash adds. “For example, there was a mother who came from a town 40 kilometres away with her child, just because she so keen to learn.”

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<sup>1</sup> Not real name.

What lies ahead for these participants are the second and third phases of the programme, which means first vocational training and then practical work experience in one of the companies Kyriakos Angelides, OEB, contacted. However, for four of the participants, there will also be a great opportunity to help other asylum seekers. These four participants will receive additional training on the Cypriot legal system, and mediation and counselling techniques to become employment mediators. Not only will they provide active support to asylum seekers in work or trainee positions, but they will also provide a link towards authorities and help out in case of difficulties. These mediators, who will be placed at the “Mechanism of Mediation and Employment Support” which will be supported by KISA and one of the trade unions, the Pancyprian Federation of Labour (PEO), which also participates in the programme, will not only help asylum seekers who participate in the EQUAL project, but also those outside the scope of the programme who need assistance with different employment issues. The aim is that by the end of EQUAL they will have helped 500 people.

## UNITED FOR GOOD

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The EQUAL Partnership ‘Equality and Solidarity for Asylum Seekers – Guarantee for Employment and Freedom’ has brought together the six main actors working in the asylum seekers field in Cyprus. The project is managed by Intercollege, which is the academic member of the network. The other members are the employers’ organisation OEB, the trade union organisation PEO, KISA (active support to asylum seekers and immigrants), the Ministry of Interior, and G & D Social Lab (a private research and consulting company). A Management Board has been established, where each of these organisations is represented. This Board not only provides overall guidance for the project, but also allows the partners to discuss specific challenges and agree on the more general direction of work. “Normally we would never work together with a trade union organisation,” Kyriakos Angelides from OEB, the employers’ organisation says. “This is the first time ever we collaborate on a project – to help asylum seekers in their contacts with and trainee placements in Cypriot companies.”

The partners have divided the responsibilities for carrying out the project according to each partner’s specific experience and opportunities, but through the Management Board they also get an important overview of what the others are doing. This ensures that the partners are not working in isolation, but are committed to working together on the project and building on each others’ experiences. In terms of getting the most out of each partner’s possibilities, Intercollege has taken on the responsibility to organise the Greek language and vocational training courses, , KISA is responsible for the Cypriot and European culture education as well as the mediation training, the employers’ organisation for contacts with employers and the trade union for ensuring that equal opportunities are respected at the work placements and discrimination is prevented. In this important work, the trade union will be supported by the four trained asylum seeker mediators, who also will provide direct assistance to the asylum seekers.

“For us it is extremely important that we have been able to form such a broad network with various organisations to assist asylum seekers with their integration into Cypriot society,” Louiza Papaloizou, Project Manager (Intercollege) says. “It is invaluable to have the main employers’ organisation on board. I am sure that the fact that Kyriakos Angelides from OEB was the one who asked companies to provide trainee placements to asylum seekers made this process incredibly smoother than what could otherwise have been the case. Also, it is extremely important to have KISA on board, which the asylum seekers know and already have built a relationship of trust with. The Ministry of Interior also provides credibility to the project in contacts with other important actors and policy makers.”

“For me it is important to make sure that the asylum seekers are not exploited and taken advantage of,” Kyriakos Angelides from OEB explains. “Those companies I have contacted are ones which I know have a sound equal opportunities policy and can take good care of the asylum seekers during their trainee period in their company.” Before they start their trainee placements, a representative at OEB will visit each of the companies where they will work and inform employees about what is meant by ‘asylum seeker’ and the legal context in Cyprus. The OEB will also function as a contact point for employers throughout the internship period. “The prompt and massive interest from employers to provide trainee places for asylum seekers shows that there is definitely a possibility for asylum seekers to get into the labour market, also in sectors other than

agriculture,” Kyriakos Angelides says. After all the trainee placements have been finalised, a meeting will be organised, to which all employers who have provided trainee places will be invited. This meeting will serve as a follow-up and will provide an excellent opportunity for the different parties to discuss what worked well and what were the main challenges.

## To BE CONTINUED...?

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Work on creating an impact on policy makers and opening up this possibility of dialogue has been integrated in the Cypriot EQUAL Asylum Seekers project's approach from the start. "It is very important that the Ministry of Interior is one of our partners," Louiza Papaloizou says. "That way we have at least one direct channel to which we can communicate ongoing developments and success stories. We are, though, prepared for some very difficult work ahead of us. We are certain that the programme we have developed is an excellent way for asylum seekers to integrate faster in Cypriot society, but it is only a pilot program with temporary measures and interventions. Our aim is that ultimately, through this programme, we will impact on government policy with some long lasting effects. If more sectors were open to asylum seekers to work in and more asylum seekers were able to make their own living, less people would be dependent on welfare support. By adopting our approach, it is evident that costs can be saved."

To already spread the message at an early stage, a big launch event will be organised at the same time as asylum seekers start their trainee placements. Journalists, policy makers, employers, relevant organisations and the general public will be invited to the event. "This event will be a great opportunity for us to show who asylum seekers are and the amazing individuals who are grouped behind this concept," Louiza Papaloizou explains.

Part of the project has been targeted at increasing awareness and decreasing discrimination and xenophobia as the arrival of asylum seekers is very recent in Cyprus and few people seem to be aware of what they go through. Therefore, several different actions at the launch event will focus on informing different actors of what being an asylum seeker really means. A video where asylum seekers explain why they came to Cyprus and their background will be one of the products that will be made especially for the launch event, but which can also be used on other occasions. As part of the material that will be produced to increase public awareness, a photographer will travel around Cyprus in summer 2006 and visit asylum seekers at their work places in the agricultural sector. The photographs will be accompanied by short presentations made by asylum seekers and will be published in a book.

"Temporary stay and work has for very long been the guiding principle behind the actions – or rather lack of actions – from the Cypriot government," Doros Polykarpou (KISA) says. "This makes our work very difficult, but if we do not try to make a change – who will?"

## CONTACT DETAILS

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