

The information in this document reflects the situation when it was written in 2006. Please bear in mind that some contact information may since have changed.

EMPOWERING WOMEN EMPOWERS THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



They call it a ghetto, but at first glance, the Vollsmose neighbourhood in Odense looks like an assembly of functional, modern buildings in the middle of green parkland. However, Vollsmose is one of the Danish housing estates where over the last 30 years people with social problems have been concentrating. These areas have also become home to ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees. Around 12.000 people live in Vollsmose, approximately 65 % have another ethnic background than Danish. Half of

the Vollsmose inhabitants are of working age, but 3.000 people receive welfare cheques or are enrolled in job activation schemes. Regular jobs are rare. Besides unemployment, typical problems are alcohol and drug abuse, violence and crime, which, according to research may have an influence on attitudes and behaviour of children and youth. Moreover, the population of the neighbourhood is often discriminated against in the labour market or in the education and training system.

STEP BY STEP TOWARDS CHANGE

Led by the Institute for Serviceudvikling a/s (ISU), the EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) [Virksomhed Vollsmose](#) is developing a model that combines multifaceted activities in and around the housing estate, all aimed to create employment and, particularly, to develop job niches for women who are at risk of becoming permanent outcasts from the labour market. ISU, a private consulting firm specialising in support to disadvantaged groups has joined forces with the Municipality of Odense, the real estate company that owns Vollsmose, the Danish Trade Union Confederation, NGOs, social networks and a number of companies based in Odense and its surroundings. The municipality is the most pro-active of all partners, valuing the potential of the EQUAL project for its own endeavour of developing an employment policy for the area. *“The idea is to increase the number of inhabitants participating in the workforce and at the same time to let them be responsible for the development of the area”,* says Thieme Rasmussen from the Odense Jobcentre at the municipality. *“With 68% of the adult population receiving transfer income Vollsmose is the poorest area in Denmark. To avoid an extension of the parallel society it is necessary to focus on peoples’ employability and access to the labour market. We believe by engaging the inhabitants sustainable solutions can be achieved. It is a question of strengthening the qualifications and competencies of each individual citizen to enable him or her to make the maximum of their ability to work – for the greater good of the society and to and provide for their families. The empowerment project shows that positive energies can be released to a so far unheard of extent, which gives cause to optimism for the future. It is always easier to develop the connection to the labour market when a bridge is already initiated than when you are standing outside.”*

With its 3.700 apartments, four schools, a sports centre, a mall with shops and public services, several kindergartens and clubs Vollsmose provides jobs to many people, but most of them come from other parts of Odense. *“We want to create jobs in the area with and for the local inhabitants. We have christened the unborn child ‘Vollsmose Enterprise’, an enterprise to be consumer-owned and run by people from the area”,* says Karin Sibani, the project coordinator. After exploring different models of enterprises that might be suitable for the intended venture, the project team envisages a kind of holding, that takes several small companies and employment initiatives under its wing. That could be private businesses or social economy enterprises set up by individuals or groups. Two strands of activities were launched: preparing and founding Vollsmose Enterprise,

whilst at the same enabling women and men in so-called Development Workshops to start viable businesses or take up one of the new jobs generated by the project.

BUILDING COMMITMENT AND OWNERSHIP

The Development Workshops are gender specific and being offered to women and men. They each last for six months and help participants to move closer to both the labour market and Danish society. Whilst the “Balder project ” targeting men is still at its early stages, the women’s project named IDUN is already running courses for 40 women. IDUN is much more than a training programme. It is a new way of life for women of different age groups and cultural heritage, yet almost all sharing an Islamic background. Policy makers often label them as a “hopeless and almost impossible to reach target group”. Some are illiterate or have never made a step outside the Vollsmose housing estate. Now within the IDUN project they have learned to be independent and responsible for everything going on in the “house”, which is a spacious apartment with four rooms, a kitchen, two toilets and a balcony. Husbands are not allowed to enter the premises and kids only in case of emergency. It is up to the group of participants to choose an educational itinerary they wish to pursue. Based on their decisions the EQUAL DP procures adequate guidance, teaching and training. But it is the group that has to design the activities in detail, plan the courses and allocate the budget. They are supported by a project manager whose job it is make things work out for each new course and by a “hostess”, a woman recruited from amongst the participants who coordinates the practical daily activities. *“This whole set-up is breaking with the usual approach of job activation programmes in Denmark, where the women would have to join fixed goals, activities and schedules”,* explains Lissi Kieler, the project manager. *“We believe that our method will prevent that the women will become social clients again. We are convinced that involvement leads to commitment, commitment leads to joint ownership, which in turn leads to motivation and to success. ”*

The women’s persisting involvement and ambition to make the maximum of the training they have received indicates that this is a valid point. IDUN courses include a cooking school, hairdressing, fashion design and sewing. From each course a business idea emerged, which is put into practice by groups of women ready to become entrepreneurs. The cooking school is heading for an ethnic catering service that is already attracting many customers from both inside and outside the housing estate. Their cuisine is so much in demand that they are now producing a cookbook, which translates recipes from Turkey, the Middle East and African countries for use in Denmark.

A second group has turned one room of the apartment into a hairdressing parlour and succeeded to establish a solid customer base whose demand can often not be satisfied. The group members can’t wait to formally start their business.

The new hairdressers received practical and theoretical training by a professional female hairdresser from the local vocational school who was contracted by the EQUAL project. They could, however, not earn the usual Danish certificate which requires that apprentices gain qualifications to serve both male and female customers, because by the rules of religious conduct Muslim women can only provide hairdressing services to their own sex.



The world of fashion is the focus of the two other groups which have received a thorough vocational training in sewing and manufacturing clothing. Whilst for some women their future jobs appeared to be rather linked to services such as changing and repairing all kinds of textiles, others developed promising product ideas. What they have in mind is mostly based on their own experience: Muslim women may follow the dress code of their religion, but they are quite keen to do this in a “fashionable way”, especially when they are young. *“All scarves that can be found in Denmark are boring in terms of colours and patterns, made for grannies”,* explains the hostess Huda A-Kazwini from Iraq. *“We will design and produce scarves and other items that are adapted to the taste and needs of ethnic minority women. We are sure that this is a real market niche.”* Nimco who is from Somalia discovered another niche. She had wanted her little daughters to participate in their school’s swimming lessons, but had to ensure that their bodies were fully covered. So, Nimco made those cute swim suits for them - with long sleeves and long legs, which are now the nucleus of a swim suit collection that will be part of a whole range of

ethnic fashion products developed at IDUN. Some of the traditional garments from different cultures may also find a market outside the ethnic communities.

SHAPING A NEW KIND OF ENTERPRISE

Whilst at IDUN the women acquired new skills and entrepreneurial capacities, the DP coordinators based at ISU were busy with fine-tuning the core elements of the future holding, undertaking market research, preparing all the ingredients for a business plan and reaching out to possible sponsors. Moreover, an Employment Fund was set up that will hold 51% of the stocks of the new company. Anyone in the area who wants to support Vollsmose Enterprise can buy shares for 500 Dkr (60 Euro) a piece.

“Our dream for the future is of course that everybody will be working in permanent jobs either in Vollsmose Enterprise or in other companies”, says Karin Sibani. However, for several reasons that may be impossible to achieve. The example of the women who were trained for hairdressing illustrates the challenges the EQUAL project is facing. Firstly, only few of the IDUN women may be able to work a regular, full time job. Most of them have health problems due to too many pregnancies and births at a very young age and/or heavy physical labour. Some are traumatised by experiences of war and violence in their countries of origin. Secondly, even if a hairdressing store can be convinced of the women’s specific qualities to serve a multi-ethnic female clientele, they would still be requested to take off their head scarf. Only a minority would be prepared to do that. So, to accommodate the needs of women with difficult health conditions or with small children flexible part-time jobs created at IDUN’s own hairstyling business are the best solution.

Yet, there are other women who are willing to venture outside of Vollsmose. To encourage and support their efforts the project has brought established businesses on board that might need temporary workers to deal with bottlenecks or be interested to hire trainees. Not all occupations are as touchy as hairdressing: one is training as office worker and another as sales clerk in a fashion store outside of Vollsmose, three have actually found jobs. More apprenticeships, for instance related to maintenance and renovation of the neighbourhood, are being offered. The project is working to strengthen these working relationships with public and private companies and to open up new ways of cooperation, such as contract-based agreements. The first of this kind is actually taking advantage of a niche on the textile and clothing market. Vollsmose Enterprise will be entrusted with amending and repairing garments that were manufactured for Danish fashion companies in South-East-Asia. Sending them back for those corrections would be much too expensive, as would be having them done in the Danish clothing industry. *“This is a big chance for IDUN”,* says Allan Emiliussen, who is the responsible consultant at ISU. *“If we can satisfy our contractor under this first agreement, we may be able to continue exploiting this niche and providing jobs to our women that we can tailor to their individual needs. More opportunities are arising every day.”*

MAKING EMPOWERMENT SUSTAINABLE

All those steps towards change would not have been possible without the project’s empowerment strategy. When applying for participation many women were in doubt whether they would be able to achieve the ambitious goals set out by the DP: *“Getting a real job and supporting oneself? Becoming a role model to influence future generations? Joining debates and being part of society? Would this really be possible – through a programme that lasted for just six months?”* What many women could hardly believe when they first joined IDUN did actually happen or is about to. A set of rules helped to stimulate and constantly strengthen a development process of both individuals and groups. Those rules include the already described decision-making and responsibility for all activities, the obligation to use Danish as a common language, to make a personal plan with detailed goals and to write a diary to keep track of personal and group progress. Measuring what has been achieved over time functions as a system of milestones, which keep triggering further empowerment and progress.



“For me the cooperation between us is the most important thing we have achieved”, says Maha, a Palestinian woman. *“After all there are huge differences between our cultures, many of us come from Turkey, others from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon or from as far as Somalia. That we can work together and make the differences an advantage – as in the catering business – is a real wonder.”*

An important element of the DP's empowerment strategy is also to help the women become familiar with the Danish media system and the functioning of democracy, particularly in their local environment. *“We are discussing issues of daily concern”* reports Lissi Kieler, *“the actual political debate, schools, health, parenthood, exercise – whatever leads us closer towards a better understanding of women's life in Denmark.”* Speaking up against a group of nationalists that recently threatened to march through Vollmose put the women's newly acquired self-confidence to the test. Together they drew up a letter urging the police to prevent the march from moving through the neighbourhood; they argued in the event of such a confrontation they would not be able to control their sons and that violence was likely to happen. They collected 60 signatures and formed a delegation who took the letter to the police station, which had actually had the same idea and confined the march to down-town Odense. The policeman in charge came round for coffee a week later to get to know the women, the project, and to introduce himself as a natural part of the neighbourhood. He emphasised his interest to create a “friendly” relationship between police and residents and how the women's initiative has helped to get it started.

Experiences like that are reinforcing the commitment of women like Nimco to whom becoming independent from welfare cheques is the most important goal. They trust that after the end of the EQUAL project, the sustainability of Vollsmose Enterprise with its different elements and the job club which supports women who work at the regular labour market will continue to help them take their life in their own hands. In the job club women share their experiences and are helping each other deal with the frustrations and misunderstandings, which may arise due to cultural differences in the work place. A mentoring network “Kvinfo” is part of this strategy and supports many women through personal coaching.

It is too early to assess the impact of the project on the mainstream provision for the integration of ethnic minorities into the Danish labour market and society. Yet, there are a few signals that show that the good practices are not without influence. The Vocational School is now offering a scheme that enables Muslim Women to train for hairdressing exclusively dedicated to the needs of female customers and to earn a certificate. Social workers are encouraging their clients to join IDUN. Six women are on the waiting list. The municipality provided some extra funding to make IDUN's kitchen more suitable for professional cooking, thus contributing to growing and consolidating the business. Municipalities in other parts of Denmark are developing an interest in the activities of the DP and come visiting and/or participating in project events.

THE TRANSNATIONAL FASHION CONNECTION

The EQUAL projects forming the [“La Credenza”](#) Transnational Partnership (TP) are working to create and/or maintain jobs within the EU, that for years used to be transferred to so-called cheap-wage countries. Partners are located in [Italy](#), the [Netherlands](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) and share a common focus on engaging disadvantaged groups in training and life-long learning. At the same time the TP is developing models of integrated business support and training customised to the specific needs in declining and economic growth sectors. Clothing, textiles, fashion and creative sectors are being targeted with the aim of developing higher value added activities. For Vollsmose Enterprise the prior experience of its partners with working in and with the textile industry is invaluable. In particular, the Danes are benefiting from the “Cutting IT” DP, that is based in an area of East London, which has the largest ethnic and refugee population in the country. [Newham College of Further Education](#), the lead partner of that project, has for many years worked closely with ethnic minority companies in the clothing and textile sector and assisted them to develop ethnic fashion products.

La Crendenza is developing a European Knowledge Centre as vehicle to collect and transfer best practice, share knowledge on market trends in areas such as design and new technological applications in the textile and clothing industry, whilst at the same time promoting common European standards, competencies and professional profiles. The ethnic fashion niche that is beginning to go strong in the partner countries will greatly benefit from the new tool.

Contact

Virksomhed Vollsmose
Karin Sibani
Institut for Serviceudvikling
DK-5000 Odense
Tel.: +45 2020 3335
E-mail: reception@serviceudvikling.dk
Website: www.vollsmose.socialfonden.net
www.vollsmose.dk