

## DIVERSITY AS A STRATEGY IN FACING THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE

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The LIBRA Development Partnership (DP) in Sweden is creating forward looking strategies to tackle skills gaps and labour shortages in the building industry through opening up careers for women and ethnic minorities. Until now, both blue and white collar jobs in the construction industry in Sweden have been dominated by men of Swedish origin. However, this staunch domain of "white males" is facing a dramatic reduction in its traditional labour supply. With increasing numbers of the current workforce nearing retirement, it has been estimated that the industry will need to fill 90.000 job vacancies in the coming decade. Similarly, the trade unions in this sector will need to attract 120.000 new members if they are to maintain their status and role as social partners.

### A PARTNERSHIP OF MOVERS AND SHAKERS

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In EQUAL, leading organisations from the construction sector have committing themselves, for the first time, to combating discrimination and labour market segregation. [LIBRA](#) has forged a strong coalition between the Swedish Construction Federation, the Building Workers Union and the Union of Clerical and Technical Employees in the Industry, Galaxen that is a rehabilitation organisation and Ynsab , a service enterprise for vocational training. All these partners are in a position to disseminate and mainstream the DP's outcomes. Galaxen is owned by the national employers' federation and the five largest construction companies in the country. Its successful back-to-work model for unemployed construction workers and those with less serious disabilities provided a sound basis for LIBRA's training and (re)integration activities. Ynsab has been



commissioned by the social partner organisations to develop, monitor and control vocational training. Its remit extends over 20 different building skills in which there is an emphasis on basic training for young people at local secondary schools and also on construction sites.

This powerful inner circle has been further strengthened by strategically chosen partners, ranging from the National Labour Market Administration (AMS), to small and large companies, including market leaders such as Skanska, NCC,

Peab and JM. Different educational institutions such as secondary schools, vocational and engineering schools and universities have also joined forces with the DP, as have local communities, immigrants' NGOs and women's networks that support the few female workers in the construction sector.

### A LABORATORY FOR DIVERSITY

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LIBRA partners are well aware of the obstacles to bringing about change in a sector where deeply rooted stereotypes are quite common. Yet, rather than over-emphasising the hurdles, the DP seeks to build on positive developments. A study on people's perceptions of gender equality and diversity in the work place plays an important part in that strategy. The largest group of respondents in this random sample of 500 employees were skilled workers and the average time spent in the construction industry by respondents was 22 years. Whilst some of the expected prejudices and misconceptions about women and immigrants emerged from the study, it also revealed positive attitudes towards these two target groups and a willingness to contribute actively to their integration into the construction sector. This was seen as the launch pad for many of the activities of the DP.

LIBRA is developing and testing pilot actions addressing three major areas of intervention in a huge laboratory that comprises enterprises, the education and training system and society in general. The models are focusing on the most crucial aspects of the intended process of change:

- Tackling negative attitudes to female and immigrant workers in construction enterprises;
- Creating work environments that facilitate the retention of women in the sector;
- Tailoring life-long learning schemes and working conditions to the needs of older employees and those that have a work-related injury;
- Attracting women and young immigrants to career paths in construction;
- Influencing attitudes of school boards, teachers and students of secondary schools and higher education institutions to value diversity;
- Developing new forms of education and training for recent immigrants;
- Enhancing the image of the building industry by making the status and quality of its jobs more visible to the public at large;

Each model contains a wealth of interlinked projects, which are carried out in different settings in the regions of Skåne, Halland and Vestra Götaland. The major thrust of the activities is geared towards attitudinal change. Interactive theatre in the work place and in schools is used to unmask the prejudices of Swedish people about immigrants and vice-versa. Performances are always followed by a discussion, which is the starting point for a wider debate about values, prejudices and how to counteract xenophobia. The DP has also designed a provocative [mobile installation](#) to be used at exhibitions and events. This is a changing cubicle that might be found on a construction site with the usual display of sexist posters and calendars on its walls but next to it is the cubicle of the future. This has no such display and has been designed to accommodate the needs of both women and men and of workers and site managers alike.

Other activities are more directly concerned with labour market access and sustainable integration. Some of the few female and immigrant construction workers are acting as role models in the projects' guidance and training activities. They are conveying their first-hand experiences of working in the industry and also sharing strategies that they have used successfully in the work environment, which in the beginning can often be hostile. In addition, the DP is sensitising career counsellors and teachers by inviting these "witnesses" to regular meetings held by AMS for these groups of professionals. LIBRA projects are also offering traineeships in companies and supporting beneficiaries through various networks. A pilot scheme is introducing diversity management on construction sites through the training of current and future managers and crew leaders. Job analysis and re-design with the perspective of creating more family friendly working arrangements is another important activity. The results are already being applied in selected companies through a test run of flexible working hours and job sharing for women and men. This is a novelty in the Swedish construction sector, which the DP hopes to disseminate and multiply.

## **A TRANSVERSAL APPROACH BINDING ALL PARTNERS**

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LIBRA believes that each activity requires the active participation of all its partners and this approach is reflected in the composition of the steering groups that are responsible for the various actions taking place in the three regions - a total of 39 different projects! All these good practices are being disseminated, together with a tool kit, to other regions and even more companies, local communities and education and training providers. Also, given the importance of the social partner organisations, it is expected that LIBRA's outcomes will also impact on future collective agreements.

## **A TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING PROCESS**

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LIBRA is working with three transnational partners based in [Belgium](#), [France](#) and [Portugal](#). The DPs share the common goals of attracting young people and new groups of workers such as women and immigrants to the building sector and tuning both vocational training and the work environment to their needs. The learning and exchange processes of the Transnational Partnership "[Integration in Construction](#)" are focussed on strategies for changing attitudes and business cultures towards gender equality and diversity.

**LIBRA**

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