

OBSERVING THE REALITY OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

Policy-makers can often be far away and far removed from the persons they are meant to be addressing. To address this problem, the OASIS Development Partnership in Toulouse, France is examining the effects asylum policies are having on the persons they're applied to. It has launched an Observatory which will monitor asylum trends in France and reveal the impact that they have on the day-to-day reality of asylum seekers living in south-western France. At the same time, the members of the partnership are providing asylum seekers arriving in the region with the help and assistance they need to make their stay as comfortable and constructive as possible while they are waiting for an outcome to their asylum applications.

Asylum policies in many countries of the European Union have gone through considerable changes in the past few years. Unfortunately, there seems to be a trend towards more stricter and restrictive policies which make seeking asylum in the EU more and more difficult. In France, the major change introduced by the new asylum law of 2003 was a shortening of the asylum procedure. Before the introduction of the new law, asylum seekers could wait up to three or four years to receive a decision on their applications. This long waiting period would leave many asylum seekers in a legal and social limbo with few opportunities and an uncertain future. The new law has shortened the asylum procedure to three months on average. While asylum seekers now have to spend less time waiting for a decision, they face a host of other problems. They are required to submit an application for asylum in writing and in French, within three weeks of arriving in France. This is a challenge for many asylum seekers, most of whom do not speak or write French. Also, three weeks is not a long time to find the support they need to prepare the application and gather the necessary documentation. The average asylum acceptance rate is only 8.5%. If they receive a positive decision, they will be granted refugee status and can begin to build a new life in France. If the application for asylum is turned down, they can appeal the decision but have to leave the country if the appeal is unsuccessful. The acceptance rate at the appeal stage is 25%.

Asylum seekers in France are in a very precarious position: they receive only €10 to live on per day and are not allowed to work. There are some rare exceptions granted for seasonal work (in agriculture, for example), but opportunities are few and far between. They are also excluded from volunteer work and training. Organisations assisting asylum seekers in other countries in the EU try to find other ways to give them a chance to gain valuable experience and make the most of their time spent waiting for a decision through internships or work placements. But this approach is very difficult to pursue in France as the law prohibiting the occupation of asylum seekers is very strict and penalties are tough. These restrictions put asylum seekers in a difficult position and many are forced into the informal economy and even prostitution.

Asylum seekers in France have the possibility to live in state-funded reception centres but places are limited and some have no choice but to sleep rough on the streets. The asylum acceptance rate for asylum seekers living in reception centres is 65%. This is because they have the help and support of reception centre staff to prepare their applications for asylum. This shows how important it is to provide asylum seekers with the support they need as soon as possible on arrival. Though employment and training activities are prohibited, reception centres are allowed to provide language classes. They also offer legal, social and medical assistance, and activities which can encourage asylum seekers' social integration and make their stay in France a little easier. Though organisations assisting asylum seekers are doing their best within this challenging policy context, the three-month average waiting period is far too short to be able to provide asylum seekers with the orientation and guidance they need.

This widening gap between asylum policy and the reality faced by asylum seekers in France is being addressed by the OASIS Development Partnership in Toulouse. The partnership is made up of three organisations assisting asylum seekers: CCPS (Comité de Coordination pour la Promotion et en Solidarité des Communautés en Difficultés – Migrants et Tsiganes), CIMADE and UCJG Robert Monnier (a reception centre for asylum seekers). The partnership has launched an innovative project which will observe and monitor asylum trends in France and

reveal the day-to-day reality of asylum seekers living in Toulouse and surrounding areas. “*The aim of the observatory is to provide a snapshot of the day-to-day reality of asylum seekers,*” explains the Sociologist David Rohi who is leading the study on behalf of the partnership. “*This should help us better understand what asylum seekers go through from the moment they arrive in France, their day-to-day life, and the challenges and difficulties they face.*”

As part of the study, 20 asylum seekers living in the Toulouse area will be interviewed at regular intervals so as to “track” their experiences while they are waiting for an outcome to their asylum applications. Each person’s “migratory journey” will be explored from their arrival in France, their day-to-day experiences, and the successes and difficulties they face. Interviews will also be held with persons who work with asylum seekers like social workers, solicitors, doctors and psychologists, as well as with officials from state institutions and social services, to hear their views and gather feedback on the practical implementation of policies: what works and what is in need of improvement. Such an approach takes a close look at the reality faced by asylum seekers and the direct impact of the policies in place. This will provide an opportunity to identify gaps in current policies and inform the policy development process.

The aim of the observatory is not to produce an academic study but a useful and topical information document which will be accessible to a wide audience. It will also feature good practices and the recommendations and opinions formulated by asylum seekers themselves as well as persons who work with them. The results of the observatory will be a valuable communication and lobbying tool which will serve to educate and inform not only decision- and policy-makers but also the general public about the realities faced by asylum seekers in France. Results will be disseminated in the form of a CD-rom which will also be made available on-line to reach as many people as possible. It will include sound-clips collected during interviews and photographs taken by asylum seekers (during the photography workshop described below), as well as links to useful websites and relevant legal texts.

SOFTENING THE LANDING

The OASIS partners have brought together their expertise and experience to provide asylum seekers with the help and assistance they need when they first arrive in Toulouse. This includes help with finding accommodation, providing legal and administrative assistance, access to an interpreter, language courses, and socio-vocational activities which allow asylum seekers to make use of their existing skills. Such activities can prepare asylum seekers for their entry to the labour market once they have received refugee status, or for their return to their home country if they receive a negative decision. “*The better prepared they are, the more seamless their integration into the labour market can be,*” explains Catherine Poinas of UGJG Robert Monnier, a reception centre for asylum seekers, and one of the project partners. “*Asylum seekers have skills which they could use to make a contribution to the host country. Leaving asylum seekers in a state of dependence and inactivity can have psychological and social repercussions.*”

The lack of interpretation services for asylum seekers in France presents a serious communication problem. There is no interpretation provided during the asylum determination process. This means that non-governmental organisations assisting asylum seekers have to provide this service. A lack of sufficient resources means that volunteers need to be depended on to provide this important service. Such volunteers are often not professional translators or interpreters so the quality of the service can vary. Also, a high degree of cultural sensitivity is essential as asylum seekers have often experienced traumatic experiences which can make communicating difficult. One of the activities implemented by the OASIS partnership is to provide the services of a pool of interpreters specially trained in intercultural communication and in the medical, social and psychological sectors. This service is available to institutions that provide social, medical and other services to asylum seekers, and can also be provided over the phone. Such a service facilitates asylum seekers’ access to health, social and medical services including psychological support.

REACHING OUT TO OTHERS

Where words fail, images are a useful tool for communication and expression. Photo workshops run by the OASIS partnership for woman asylum seekers staying in reception centres have given them an opportunity to use photography to communicate with others and tell their stories. The workshops also offer the chance to practice and develop French language skills in an informal

setting. Each participant was given a disposable camera and asked to take photographs of their first impressions of France, with interesting results. Elisabeth Vetter of UGJG Robert Monnier facilitated these workshops and describes the outcome: *“Many women took pictures of the train station. This is very significant because it’s often their point of entry to Toulouse. For some women, this was their first experience with photography, the very first time they took photographs!”* The station, the hospital, the place where they first stayed are recurring subjects for their photographs, as are objects that are new discoveries for some: a TGV train, an escalator, a cash machine. The images produced during these workshops will also contribute to the activities and final product of the observatory described above. The photographs taken are another way to tell their stories and reveal the reality of their everyday lives. They will also provide visual images for the multimedia cd-rom.

A vibrant annual multicultural festival “Voyages, regards croisés sur les migrations” is organised by CIMADE, one of the OASIS partners, with the support of several NGOs and local and regional government authorities. The festival which includes a wide range of interactive activities, is a way to reach out to others and raise awareness about the asylum seekers and other migrants living in the south-west of France. Last year’s festival took the reception and trajectories of asylum seekers as a theme and featured over 20 activities ranging from photography exhibitions, cooking classes, film screenings followed by debates, art workshops, and storytelling over a period of 11 days. The festival was a huge success with over 2700 people participating. For the 6th edition taking place in 2006, a variety of artistic and cultural activities as well as public debates will be organised around the theme of the detention of asylum seekers in France and in Europe.

WORKING TOGETHER ACROSS BORDERS

The OASIS partnership is part of a transnational network called TRIALOG (which represents three-way communication between the target group, the host society and intermediaries) bringing together EQUAL partnerships in Belgium, Ireland, Spain and Slovakia that are working on issues related to intercultural mediation, interpretation, and integration activities for asylum seekers and Roma people. The network has set up a rotating presidency where each partnership takes turns chairing the network. Regular steering committee meetings are held with representatives of each partnership to plan joint activities. The network held its launch in October 2005 in Grenada, Spain which gave each of the transnational partners the chance to meet, exchange approaches and ideas, and identify common platforms. Two other conferences are planned: one in October 2006 and a final conference to be held in Brussels in October 2007 in order to present the policy lessons and messages which have come out of the transnational network at the European level.

The work of the network has been divided into four thematic working groups examining: interpretation, intercultural mediation with Roma peoples, employability and excluded groups, and national observatories. By meeting regularly and exchanging experiences, the EQUAL partnerships taking part in the transnational network can not only swap good practices and methodologies, but also gain an understanding of differences and parallels in terms of context, problems, and solutions in other Member States. By working together, transnational partners can also achieve more impact at a European level. Jean-Noël Walkowiak of CCPS, one of the OASIS partners, describes the benefits of working together with other transnational partners: *“The network not only provides an opportunity to exchange information on practices, methodologies, ideas and tools, and learn about lobbying. It also allows partners to join resources and hold joint events in order to achieve more impact.”*

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