

PROVIDING GLOBAL RANGE OF ACTIVITIES TO ASYLUM SEEKERS

As a “lighthouse”, FAAR (which reads the same as “phare” – the French word for lighthouse) means for asylum seekers participating in the project finding “solid ground”. The EQUAL partnership is designed to accompany them in a large variety of situations they may come across during their stay in France. In other words, FAAR offers them a global service. “We have built the Development Partnership around three axes”, underlines Marie-Jo Descolonges, one of the project initiators. “At the beginning we offer asylum seekers language training and juridical support in the asylum procedure, while at a later stage we provide assistance in relation to employment issues”. Most of the projects targeting asylum seekers focus only on the juridical axis or provide some form of social support such as advice or housing. Training or empowering activities, essential for the integration and general well-being of these people, are completely forgotten.

Between 2000 and 2004, France experienced peak numbers of asylum seekers coming to the country¹, becoming the country which receives, even today, the highest numbers of asylum seekers amongst the EU member states. The maximum capacity of the existing lodging and support services was surpassed, with many asylum seekers remaining deprived of any assistance and literally being left on the street. The origins of the FAAR² EQUAL partnership go back to this period. In 2001, CIMADE³, the leading organisation of FAAR, designed and delivered a series of training sessions for staff working in reception centres. This experience enabled the training unit of CIMADE to identify substantial gaps in the assistance provided to asylum seekers. The most urgent needs detected included French language courses and legal advice. At the time, and unfortunately even these days, language courses, and training courses in general, were not funded by any official government programme. Even though asylum seekers officially do have the right to access training, it is very difficult for them to actually receive some. Organisations willing to deliver training to this target group often meet severe difficulties to finance such activities. Therefore, for CIMADE and its partners, EQUAL offered an excellent opportunity to build a project which would offer asylum seekers a comprehensive range of services and activities which could finally include the much needed training.

FAAR is a regional project, based in Paris and covering the Ile-de-France department. Paris and its hinterland rank first in terms of the number of asylum applications lodged in France. In 2005, these counted for nearly 42% of the total number of asylum requests⁴. The discrepancy between these figures and the proportion of reception facilities available on the same territory is striking, as Ile-de-France disposes of only 15% of the accommodation places for asylum seekers in France.

¹ The greatest number of new applications was reached in 2002 when a little more than 52 000 new applications have been reported by OFPRA (Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides - French office for protection of refugees and apatrides). However, the 2002 statistics of OFPRA did not take into account the numbers of accompanied minors or the persons asking for territorial asylum. The latter was since then replaced by “subsidiary protection” which is also under OFPRA responsibility. Hence it is justified to believe that this number was even higher.

² Formation, Accueil des demandeurs d’asile et réfugiés (Training and reception of asylum seekers and refugees)

³ Centre Œcuménique d’Entraide (Ecumenical centre for mutual assistance)

⁴ Most of the asylum seekers come from Haiti, Turkey (mostly Kurds), China, Serbia-Montenegro, Democratic Republic of Congo, Russia, Moldavia, Sri Lanka, Algeria and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Due to the complexity of the French asylum system, juridical support and advice is crucial for newcomers seeking asylum. Two different forms of asylum are recognised in France: the standard refugee status, based on the Geneva Convention, the French constitution and decisions of UNHCR; and subsidiary protection. Asylum seekers can only be accorded the latter once they have been refused refugee status. Subsidiary protection is limited in time (one year renewable) and granted to those who can prove that they are under a serious threat in their country of origin (death sentence, torture or violence due to armed conflict) which falls outside the Geneva Convention criteria.

This dual system provides asylum seekers with different, and unequal, rights and benefits. Individuals applying for the Geneva refugee status are entitled to accommodation in reception or housing centres. They also receive some financial support (280€ per adult for a maximum period of one year). Unfortunately the allowance makes no difference between single individuals and asylum seekers with dependent children, thus leaving lone mothers and families worse off than single applicants. Asylum seekers requesting subsidiary protection, however, have even less rights and are forced to live in even poorer conditions. They do not have access to the same social benefits in terms of housing and the financial support – they only have the right to reside in France and the right to health care.

LANGUAGE, LEGAL ADVICE AND EMPLOYMENT – COMPLEMENTARY PARTNER ACTIVITIES

The need for legal advice, in combination with French language courses become even more obvious when knowing that in France, asylum seekers receive no translation or interpretation services. All procedures, documents and interviews are in French and it is up to the asylum seekers to ensure that they understand. Besides dealing with the asylum process, asylum seekers also have to cope in their everyday existence. How can they escape isolation without a minimum knowledge of the French language? Between the moment in which an asylum seeker submits his/her application and the final decision on his/her status, months and even years can pass by. On average, asylum procedures have been substantially shortened during the last years, mostly due to the introduction of the “priority procedure”⁵, covering a fast growing proportion of all asylum claims⁶ in the French system. In addition, the government has set itself the objective to treat every type of application within one year. However, the existing appeal procedures are still substantially extending the period during which asylum seekers have to live in uncertainty.

In order to improve the quality of life of asylum seekers and to promote their integration, FAAR developed a series of activities to create social links amongst asylum seekers but also with the French population. Participants have daily contact with the EQUAL partnership through the language courses. These take place four times a week, for three hours. The courses are divided into three annual sessions. Participants are allocated to classes according to their command of French. The first language courses started in September 2005 with three levels, but recently a fourth level has been added for those who are continuing from the first year. The language courses designed by Cimade, the leading organisation of the EQUAL partnership, are quite different from other language courses offered to foreigners. Besides teaching “everyday” language skills and vocabulary, Cimade concentrates on enhancing the vocabulary specific to the asylum procedure, such as preparing their students for the interview with the “Appeal Commission”. The success of language teaching is already evident. “We have a very high demand for participation and the perseverance of our beneficiaries is impressive” says Carl Ebrard. The average participation rate in a course is 75%, which is extraordinary when realising

⁵ Priority procedures concerns individuals who are refused the residence permit by the relevant prefecture either on basis of the Dublin Convention or because they are nationals of so called “safe countries”. The list of countries considered as safe by France currently contains 17 states.

⁶ In 2006 36% of first applications were examined under priority procedure, against 26% in 2005 and 82% of appeal procedures were examined under priority procedure, against 68% in 2005. Source: France Terre d’Asile
www.france-terre-asile.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=222&Itemid=9

that some asylum seekers live more than one hour by train from the training facilities and that many others have children to take care of.

During the first year (2005/2006) a little more than hundred asylum seekers had the opportunity to learn French thanks to FAAR. Due to the high demand for participation, the EQUAL partnership had to use a selection procedure to identify the most suitable candidates. "Our first criterion for establishing the groups was parity between men and women" underlines Marie-Jo Descolonges. "This balance is not easy to reach because the majority of asylum seekers are men and many women have small children, but we insist on it". Other criteria are diversity in terms of national origins and the command of French in order to compose groups of a similar size. There is also an administrative criterion, as FAAR tries to reach people at the beginning of their procedure or of their appeal. This ensures certain stability in terms of attendance.

The language courses are the "centre of gravity" of the EQUAL partnership. It is here that participants are informed of the possibility to participate in other activities of FAAR. "Last year I took part in a theatre play and I went to a course with GRETA where we drew a tree based on what we can do" explains Yaso from Sri Lanka. She has been an active and enthusiastic participant in FAAR since January 2006. The "tree of knowledge" she describes is an activity developed by GRETA⁷, one of the partners in FAAR. GRETA is a major national actor in the provision of training and training-related activities, focusing advising and orientating people towards available training pathways but also on the design of training courses. The "tree of knowledge" is a new technique the organisation has developed within another EQUAL partnership⁸ in order to identify the skills and competences of those who do not have any recognised qualifications. Inspired by the "competence balance sheet" and adapted to users with little formal education, GRETA applies the "tree of knowledge" technique to participants of FAAR during three hours sessions. The aims of this exercise are twofold, namely to empower participants by making their skills and competences explicit, and to increase their professional vocabulary in relation to these skills and competences. It is highly important to link this activity to the language courses as the identification and formulation of their know-how and experiences strongly depends on the extent to which the asylum seekers can express themselves.

Very complementary to GRETA activities are the "Discovering Crafts" ateliers run by AFPA⁹, another important national player in the field of training. "Discovering Crafts" addresses asylum seekers who already have some command of French language (A1 or A2 level). The ateliers are divided into four sessions. During the first phase, which takes place in group sessions, participants are encouraged to talk about their working or training experiences, as well as to describe their interests and expectations in terms of future employment. This information is structured in the second phase, in which asylum seekers are individually interviewed in order to elaborate their professional pathway. The outcomes of the interviews help AFPA to identify vocational training places that are both suitable and feasible for asylum seekers. As part of the "Discovering Crafts" ateliers, asylum seekers are eventually invited to visit the training organisations to get more detailed information on the content and structure of the courses that they have on offer.

The juridical support developed by the EQUAL partnership is an activity shared by several partner organisations. Cimade, CAFDA¹⁰ and Chechnya¹¹ Committee all have experts in this sector. CAFDA takes care of asylum seekers who are hosted in their facilities. Their accommodation is reserved for families, single parents or pregnant women. The Chechnya

⁷ Group of public training organisations

⁸ Programme d'identification des compétences dans l'animation, le sport, le social
<https://equal.cec.eu.int/equal/jsp/dpComplete.jsp?cip=FR&national=IDF-2001-10409>

⁹ L'Agence de formation professionnelle pour adultes (Agency for adult vocational training)

¹⁰ Coordination de l'accueil des familles demandeuses d'asile (Coordination and reception of families of asylum seekers)

¹¹ Chechnya is a federal republic of Russia struggling for independence since 1991.

committee offers support to Russian speakers and Cimade covers the remaining part of the participants. Recently, Cimade started to offer juridical support in the same building as the language teaching. This ensures that asylum seekers who live far away or those who are not supported by any of the other partner organisations can still be monitored and advised.

GIVING ASYLUM SEEKERS' SPACE FOR EXPRESSION

"With FAAR we wanted more than just providing a set of services to this very excluded group" comments Marie-Jo Descolonnes. The EQUAL partnership also organises several activities which help asylum seekers and refugees to express themselves in public. A first and important step towards encouraging asylum seekers' to speak up for themselves was their involvement in the decision-making processes of the Development Partnership itself. The beneficiaries of the project are invited to take part in different project committees, in which they can have their say on progress, assist in the development of activities and decide on future priorities. When FAAR organised a trans-national seminar "Asylum seekers in Europe: Which words? For which Autonomy?" in October 2006, asylum seekers took actively part in the organisation of the event. "We also wanted to involve the beneficiaries of our transnational partners but unfortunately they did not receive their travel visa necessary to attend" comments Martin Rosselot. The half-day seminar enabled FAAR and its transnational partners to present their activities to a wider public and to decision makers. It also gave asylum seekers the possibility to make themselves heard in a public and highly prestigious place, the Paris town hall.

Another successful FAAR activity which brought asylum seekers closer to the public was the theatre play entitled "Where will I be tomorrow?" In cooperation with the well-known Parisian theatre "Théâtre du Soleil" and set in the picturesque venue "la Cartoucherie", 14 asylum seekers spoke, sang and danced in 12 scenes about their dreams, their memories and their present lives. The organisation of the play required a lot of preparation: during half a year a group of asylum seekers, originally 40, participated in a "theatre atelier" animated by Helene Cinque from the Théâtre du Soleil. In order to develop their performance skills, the asylum seeker had to become familiar with different theatre techniques and take part in a wide variety of exercise to help combating stage fright and improve their presence in front of an audience. Regular discussions were also organised to reflect on the structure and the content of the show. "For our participants this was a possibility to feel empowered but also to socialise with French people working in the theatre" comments Carl Ebrard. For the audience it was a chance to meet asylum seekers, who otherwise remain close to invisible in the French society. The play had three performances and was seen by approximately 180 people.

But asylum seekers have taken even a bolder lead in the EQUAL partnership. The cultural centre France - Chechnya, run by Chechnya refugees, is a new partner in EQUAL's Round 2 of FAAR. The centre was set up by Issita Arslanova, who got to know EQUAL when participating in the language course organised by FAAR under Round 1. Issita dreamt of founding a cultural centre which would bring together people of Chechnya origins living in the Paris region and make Chechnya better known to the French population. At that time, there were an estimated 7 000 people from Chechnya living in France but they were not organised in any way. As soon as Issita was granted refugee status she started working on her dream. FAAR welcomed her initiative and helped to establish the structure, which based on inputs from many committed volunteers is now independently run by asylum seekers and refugees from of Chechnya origins. Today, Issita is the president of the Centre founded officially in 2005. The centre develops various cultural events and offers language courses (French, Russian and Chechen). The Chechnya Committee, one of the partners in FAAR, advises the centre on how to manage and plan its activities. The aim is to make the centre independent and self-sufficient in the near future.

TRANSNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

FAAR benefits not only from the knowledge and experience of its wide range of national partners but also from the know-how and expertise of the members of the Transnational Partnership entitled "Exchanges". The three EQUAL partnerships involved in Exchanges all develop activities similar to FAAR's, including orientation, labour market insertion and language teaching, although none of the partner organisations provides juridical support. "It was very important for us to find

partners who were offering integrated approaches to supporting asylum seekers, like we do.” comments Marie-Jo Descolonges “our UK and Hungarian partners are a very good match, even though we cannot exchange experiences on juridical support.”

“Exchanges” focuses not only on sharing experiences and good practices, but also on building organisational capacity and on the formulation of policy messages. Partners meet regularly, organising field visits and staff exchanges in order to see how activities are being implemented on the ground in different national contexts. “My colleague from the employment service recently came back from an exchange visit in the United Kingdom and she felt very inspired.” says Juliette Roussel from CAFDA.

The UK Development Partnership EASI seems for example to be very strong in developing employment activities. They have found various ways to insert asylum seekers into the labour market, for example through volunteering. On the other hand, EASI is keen on transferring the French experience of empowering asylum seekers through theatre play and other forms of self-expression, which they found very interesting and innovative.

Exchanges is also organising several transnational conferences like the one in the Town hall of Paris. These events provide good opportunities for the partners to communicate their messages to a wider public and to policy makers. The conferences are also a means for asylum seekers to participate and express themselves. Unfortunately, as already mentioned earlier, it is nearly impossible to organise direct transnational exchanges between asylum seekers, as they can not travel due to restrictive visa procedures. Nevertheless, some of the participants like Issita, who has obtained the refugee status, were able to participate in transnational events in other countries and participated to their success.

CONTACT DETAILS

Marie-Jo Descolonges and Carl Ebrard
Cimade Service Formation
176 rue de Grenelle - 75007 Paris
01 44 18 60 50
carl.ebrard@cimade.org
formation@cimade.org