

STEP BY STEP TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE

In recent years the economy in Latvia has experienced a boost. As a result, a lot of people have been able to buy new and even several cars. The road and bridge network to get to and from the Latvian capital Riga where many people work has not, however, undergone any major changes. As a result there is a major traffic jam at rush hour every day. Work has now started to build a new bridge and a tunnel to improve the situation, but it will still take a couple of years before either of these will be ready. In the meantime, the situation will remain problematic.

"Currently there are few asylum seekers in Latvia," Ilva Ievina, Project Manager of the EQUAL Asylum Seekers project Step by Step explains. "However," she adds, "the situation can change very quickly. Then it will be very important that we are prepared and do not have to start from 'zero'. At this time we have the chance to properly prepare for the integration of asylum seekers into society and the Latvian labour market". In contrast to the traffic situation, the EQUAL Partnership aims at putting the infrastructure for integrating asylum seekers in place before a problem occurs.

Baiba Bieza, Director of the Refugee Affairs Department, Ministry of Interior, Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, confirms this: "Latvia has one of the lowest numbers of asylum seekers in the EU. People seeking asylum in Latvia is a new phenomenon for the entire society, including municipalities, NGOs and the general public. We only recently adopted the first national strategy on asylum seekers and immigration. Because of the very low number of asylum seekers we have currently, on average less than ten per year, work is at a minimum, on a case-by-case basis. But we are aware that this situation can change even in one hour. Numbers of asylum seekers are often not predictable. I find it extremely important that we have an action plan for a crisis situation and that the system for accommodating asylum seekers is up and running even though we do not have many asylum seekers in the country at the moment. This ensures that the asylum system will stay effective."

YOU KNOW MORE THAN YOU MIGHT THINK!

"I am interested in you, and want to help you integrate into our society." This important message is what asylum seekers get to hear when they participate in a 'skills audit', an activity that has been developed by the Step by Step EQUAL Partnership to help recognise asylum seekers' skills and qualifications. In order to be able to integrate in their new society and find a job, it is not only important for employers to get a clear insight into an asylum seeker's skills and qualifications. For the asylum seeker him/herself, it is equally important to realise what skills and valuable experiences they in fact have. Not only does this help them get a job, but it also increases their self-esteem and belief in themselves.

"I got a CD," Inese Micule, Step by Step project worker, says. "On the CD, information about other skills audit approaches that had been developed for asylum seekers in Round 1 of EQUAL was included. We found this extremely useful, and 'picked the raisins out of the cake', so to speak. We chose the practices that we found most useful, and adapted them to the Latvian context."

The CD Inese Micule mentions was produced by five EQUAL Partnerships from five different EU countries, which participated in a transnational Working Group under EQUAL Round 1. The Working Group was created to share experience and draw lessons from the different approaches to skills audits that had been developed by EQUAL Partnerships in various countries. In addition to compiling the CD, the group also contributed to a guide outlining general steps for applying skills audits to asylum seekers: 'Skills Audits – The Basics: Working with Asylum Seekers', and created a brochure for an EQUAL European conference that took place in Dublin in 2004: 'Asylum Seekers in the EU: the Challenges of Integration'.

Nelli Tatkova, a social worker who undertakes skills audit interviews with asylum seekers says: "When asylum seekers come here, I meet people who are really at their wits' end – they have been through such hard experiences that they have stopped believing in a future. They have also lost belief in themselves: "I can do nothing, I know nothing," they often say when I meet them. Moreover, many asylum seekers have come without any diplomas and certificates of their skills, which makes the skills audit a necessary tool to explain what their relevant experiences are. Nelli Tatkova explains that the skills audit is divided into three parts: the first part includes general data about the asylum seeker (name, country of origin, year of birth etc.). The second goes through their character and skills, whilst the third provides more detail on work experience, diplomas received and education achieved.

The Step by Step project workers have established close contacts with the manager of the Refugee Centre where asylum seekers are accommodated, and are informed about all new arrivals. Before a skills audit starts, a personal meeting is arranged where the asylum seeker is informed about the possibility to participate, what will happen during the interviews and what the outcome will be. No one is forced to participate in a skills audit – everyone can choose if they want to or not. "In some cases, it can be very sensitive to give up personal information," Nelli Tatkova says. "The asylum seekers are scared that the information they provide can end up in the wrong hands and that their lives will be in danger. To date, only one person has chosen not to participate, and this was because this person was too scared despite that the information is kept only between us and them."

Normally the skills audit interviewer (project worker) and the asylum seeker meet three to four times, each session lasting around 2.5 hours. "It is very good to meet several times," Nelli Tatkova says. "That gives the asylum seeker time to think through the questions and we can go back if they realise they have forgotten something important."

What about languages, not all asylum seekers speak Latvian, surely? "One part of the skills audit is not dependent on language," Nelli Tatkova explains. "Describing their level of enthusiasm for different types of jobs through the use of sad, indifferent or happy faces was something another DP had developed under EQUAL Round 1, which we found very useful and have included in our skills audit too. Otherwise, most asylum seekers who come here speak either Russian (if they come from bordering countries) or English. So far I have acted as an interpreter and translated the questions directly into either English or Russian while we were speaking," Nelli Tatkova says. "But in the future we would like to make translations into more languages."

The result of these 'interviews'? All information is collected in a personal portfolio, which is handed over to the asylum seeker. They also receive a Curriculum Vitae and a short summary, written by the project worker in Latvian, which can be given to possible employers. "I want to do something useful with my time, not just sit here in the Refugee Centre," Oleg Osinsky from Belarus says, who has had two interviews so far and has one part left to finalise the skills audit. "I think that it is really great that we have this opportunity to participate in a skills audit interview, and I really look forward to contacting employers with my documents in Latvian!"

The skills audit interview tool will be further developed and modified according to feedback from asylum seekers who have participated and from the project staff who undertake the interviews. Information about the use of the tool will be spread more widely to other organisations through a leaflet that the Partnership will produce.

SEEING EACH OTHER IN A NEW LIGHT – AT THE SAME TIME

The EQUAL Partnership Step by Step has for the first time brought together five main actors who are actively working with asylum seekers in Latvia: The Ministry of Interior – Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, Caritas, Liepaja District Council, the Latvian Red Cross and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

The Ministry of Citizenship and Migration Affairs is the leading organisation in Step by Step. Baiba Bieza, Director of the Refugee Affairs Department, says: "When we heard about the EQUAL programme, we saw it as a really interesting and important project for us as a Ministry to participate in and benefit from. Being a partner ensures that we get all results directly, which

means that we get updated information from the ground which we can use to inform policy and legislative changes.” She explains that before the EQUAL project started in Latvia, contacts with other actors in the asylum seekers field were based on personal, bilateral contacts, focussing on specific cases. No network, such as the EQUAL Partnership, where the five partner organisations work together towards a common goal, had ever been established. Through the PHARE programme, the Ministry had experiences of twinning at international level, but not within the country.

Of the five actors involved in the Partnership, four are active in the field of asylum seekers, whilst the fifth partner, the Liepaja District Council, was invited to participate to host a pilot project on an ‘integration model’ that is being developed. Society information material is an important part of this activity, as asylum seekers coming to Latvia is only a very recent phenomenon. For this reason, only very few Latvians are aware of what it means to be an asylum seeker. In fact, when different actors in the Liepaja District were invited to participate in a Working Group that was set up as part of the EQUAL project, several of the invitees had never even heard the concept ‘asylum seeker’, and for them, even being prepared to participate in the project was a big step in itself!

The partners are developing and carrying out four main activities, which are training for trainers; skills audits; development of an integration model and evaluation of legislation. Each of the partner’s experience is used efficiently in the areas that they can best contribute. The IOM is a specialist on identifying and analysing problems which hinder asylum seekers’ integration, and informing society about asylum seeker issues. Caritas Latvia develops and tests the skills audit model in the Liepaja District, where a social integration model is being created and tested.

Creating a network at national level has been very useful for all parties involved. “Each of the partners contributes invaluable expertise and experience,” Ilva Ievina, EQUAL Project Manager, says. This is confirmed by Baiba Bieza: “We are all benefiting from the project and from each others’ experiences, as the participating organisations are very different. For us in the Ministry, it has also strengthened relations between the colleagues involved – including colleagues in other ministries. The Ministry of Citizenship and Migration Affairs used to be the only ministry involved in these matters, but through the EQUAL activities we have also been able to get valuable inputs from other ministries.”

For the Ministry, which in the project amongst others is responsible for establishing a strategy to train trainers, the evaluation of legislation is extremely important so as to be able to propose amendments to relevant legislation, including increasing asylum seekers’ employment possibilities. Baiba Bieza explains that at the moment asylum seekers are not normally able to work – they only get a work permit if it is deemed that a decision on their asylum application cannot be made within a year. However, due to the very low number of asylum seekers, currently it only takes about 6 months (including appeal) for asylum seekers to receive a final decision. In the framework of the EQUAL programme, a review of legislation will be undertaken to work out how to act and what legislation changes would be necessary if the numbers of asylum seekers would drastically increase.

The Latvian Red Cross has taken on the responsibility for setting up a Consultative Board, which is a cooperation network among NGOs, state institutions and municipalities on asylum issues. Baiba Bieza is very enthusiastic about the establishment of this board, which she describes as ‘really innovative!’ The board will look at and validate the products that have been developed by the Partnership. “The asylum seekers field in Latvia is very small,” Baiba Bieza says. “Before, contacts were always based on personal relationships, but this is really an excellent opportunity for us to meet all at once and discuss issues in relation to the social integration of and possibilities for asylum seekers to get into the labour market.”

KEEP THE ‘WHEEL’ ROLLING

In addition to the national partnership that has been created, Step by Step is also involved in a transnational network, where they work together with EQUAL Asylum Seeker Partnerships from Cyprus, Greece and Belgium. Ilva Ievina, Project Manager, finds the idea to create transnational partnerships excellent: “Working together with partners from other EU countries, including those

who had already been responsible for projects in Round 1 of EQUAL, ensures that we are not reinventing the wheel. We have already really learnt a lot from our European partners," she says.

Ilva Ievina also explains that for a country like Latvia, it has been invaluable to get first hand experience from countries with a longer experience of asylum. This has provided the Latvian partners with a vision of what the situation could be like in the future, and what measures need to be set up in case of increasing numbers of asylum seekers. Ilva Ievina highlights a very concrete result of the transnational cooperation in relation to the development of an integration model in the Liepaja District. Many of the actors working in the District Council were not aware of what an asylum seeker was and what their needs may be to be able to integrate into society and get into the labour market. Through the EQUAL transnational partnership, representatives from Liepaja were able to go to Greece, meet asylum seekers and learn about how the Greek Partnership had been able to establish a successful cooperation model under Round 1 of EQUAL.

The EQUAL Partnerships from Round 1 also shared experiences with the two new Partnerships from Cyprus and Latvia of the benefits of establishing internal Working Groups to be able to work effectively within the national Partnership. This is something the Step by Step Partnership found extremely useful. A number of Working Groups have already been established, including on work in relation to the evaluation of legislation and the integration model.

Baiba Bieza has also noted the benefits of international learning. "For us, transnational cooperation has been very useful in terms of being able to learn from those countries to which high numbers of asylum seekers arrive." She adds: "It should, though, not be forgotten that even outside the boundaries of the transnational partnership, learning from EQUAL Round 1 takes place internationally. Just take the development of the skills audit tool that we are working with here. We found out that other countries also had worked in this area before us, and we could build on their experiences and adapt it to our Latvian context. EQUAL has been very good for spreading successful practices throughout the EU."

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