

**HOW TO MAKE WORK A REAL OPTION FOR ALL?
 EQUAL empowerment and social economy projects provided valuable
 answers in Workshop B2**

THREE EQUAL SUCCESS STORIES SETTING THE STAGE FOR DISCUSSION

Chaired by Dita Lūka, Parliamentary Secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Welfare, and facilitated by Nathalie Wuaime, Workshop B2 on "[Make work a real option for all](#)" addressed the problem of long-term unemployment and inactivity in two groups that are not often reached by mainstream labour market measures: people with disabilities and women with no, or low, formal qualifications.

Advocates of EQUAL good practices presented the achievements of three EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs) which, although using different approaches to the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, have much in common. They share a commitment to overturning labour market strategies that see clients as "objects" of services and support measures rather than as "subjects" who can act in their own right and determine the pace and timing of their vocational and social inclusion.

CREATING AND ENHANCING EMPOWERMENT CONCEPTS

Empowerment is a buzz word that is widely used in the context of inclusion policies, but the concept behind it is often not fully understood. Joes Verhoeven, the Director of the Start Foundation in the Netherlands, demonstrated what this concept can mean for people with disabilities. He introduced his organisation as a private investor in social experiments and social enterprises aiming to create a labour market that welcomes everyone. The Start Foundation co-financed the [VrijBaan EQUAL DP](#), in the Netherlands, which has developed a method to measure and achieve the empowerment of people with disabilities. The method includes a diagnostic tool which is a kind of questionnaire that helps people explore and assess their levels of empowerment in terms of trusting their own abilities; being able to make choices and feeling in control of their situation; engendering change in their environment; experiencing a meaning in their activities that fits with their own values; realising that they are part of a community and the need for support from that group; and finally accepting their disability in a realistic way, whilst understanding that it does not control their lives. Joes Verhoeven is convinced of the value of this tool: "It enables each individual to put their hands on the steering wheel and become actors in their own integration". However, he sees a number of problems that need to be tackled before the new method can be more generally applied. One of the obstacles are the mental health professionals and service providers who have no clear understanding of empowerment and therefore need further education. Another is the need to develop a quality standard for the new method and this requires further testing and research. The Start Foundation is in a unique position to make things happen! It has made the use of the empowerment method a binding requirement in 36 projects that receive funding from the foundation. This represents a massive laboratory that will yield results relevant to other target groups and produce insights for the training of professionals.

GENERATING EMPLOYMENT THROUGH FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

A second example of good practice was presented by Rosalía Mera who is the president of the [Paideia Galiza Foundation](#) – an organisation that has a long-standing commitment to the social inclusion of vulnerable groups and to rural development. Paideia is the lead partner in the Spanish [Deloa DP](#), which has been assisting long-term unemployed women with no formal qualifications in the setting up family support services. The services that have been created in this rural area include childcare and care for the elderly and also a flexible minibus system which is a real asset, as the remote villages are not well served by public transport. Besides creating jobs for the women who provide the services, the approach has enabled other women to commute to larger towns to embark on training or take a job. Deloa's empowerment strategy involved assessing and valuing the informal skills acquired by women in raising a family and working the land. The overall idea is to turn these competences into a solid foundation for future employment. Deloa used the same approach for training and accompanying women when they

were starting small businesses or social economy enterprises in promising market niches such as horticulture, rural tourism, carpentry and furniture restoration. The DP was very well aware that becoming a sole entrepreneur is beyond the capacities of many of its women beneficiaries, and therefore, local associations or women's groups were encouraged to take up the entrepreneurial challenge.

EMPOWERMENT AND SOLIDARITY AS GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In Greece, EQUAL is making a contribution to the reform of psychiatry that aims to close large psychiatric hospitals and transfer patients to smaller structures such as sheltered apartments, hostels or dormitories. In the framework of the national programme "Psychargos 2001 – 2010", an entirely new form of enterprise was created. These are limited liability social co-operatives that are known as KoiSPE in Greek law. The KoiSPE function at the same time as mental health units and rehabilitation and socio-professional integration centres. They operate as "for profit" entities. The Greek Synergia DP is one of the pioneers of this new model. In his presentation, Antonio Panourgias, the coordinator of the project stressed that Synergia's approach incorporates both the empowerment of people with mental health problems and a viable strategy to create jobs for this target group. For the first time in Greece, the KoiSPE offer the opportunity of becoming entrepreneur and taking their fate into their own hands to people with mental health problems. At the same time, the KoiSPE are securing employment and proper working conditions in the production process for other people with mental health problems. So far, Synergia has set up three cooperatives which have good prospects for consolidation and growth. One is producing honey and organic fruit and vegetables that are in great demand. Another provides laundry services, with a local hospital as main customer, and the third manufactures linen bags for pharmacies to store medicinal herbs. "By 2010", said Antonio Panourgias, "Synergia will have 10 more cooperatives up and running in different parts of country."

The most innovative aspects of the KoiSPE are their potential to bring about true empowerment of the target group and their strong solidarity dimension. Empowerment is achieved through the fact that at least 35 % of the members of each cooperative must be people with mental disabilities and the enterprise cannot close its door to any prospective member of that group. Another 45% of the members are mental health professionals and rest are people who wish to support this new approach. Each member has only one share and one vote. Members with problems of mental health can opt to become a KoiSPE employee at the same time or just to participate in the decision-making processes of the cooperative. "This is a form of active participation and empowerment for people who are too ill to take on permanent work," explained Antonio Panourgias, "as they can buy shares and thus contribute to creating and strengthening the employment opportunities of others who are healthier or younger than themselves." Solidarity is reinforced through the lasting commitment of volunteers who step in for employees who are temporarily unable to work due to spells of illness, helping them to keep their jobs and the cooperative to operate smoothly.

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND DISSEMINATION

As potential users of these EQUAL good practices Shira Mehlman, Director of Social Inclusion in FÁS, the Irish training and employment authority and Bert Boone, the Head of the Flemish ESF-Agency in Belgium, set the pace of the discussion by posing a series of pertinent questions:

- What are the outcomes of the new models? How do they fit into the mainstreaming provision?
- What are the implications of empowerment concepts on existing rehabilitation services and employment measures?
- Is there a multiplication effect, for example can the models be used by other client groups?
- Did the EQUAL partnerships develop strategies for sustainability and mainstreaming?
- How is it possible to secure the involvement of client groups?

Not all questions could be answered in the time remaining. However, Jos Verhoeven started by replying to the last and pointed out that his organisation is working on a permanent basis with representatives of client groups and it also makes the active participation of client groups a condition for funding. He emphasised the importance of developing training and strategies for attitudinal changes of health professionals: "If they themselves don't change their values and attitudes towards people with disabilities, how can they expect their clients to embark on all the

changes suggested by the empowerment tool?” And again, he said, the Start Foundation can “initiate and steer things” with money by setting the right financial priorities in its own work programme.

In terms of sustainability, both Rosalía Mera and Antonio Panourgias underlined the decisive role of professional management in the consolidation and growth of social economy enterprises. Continuing training to improve the skills of the managers of these ventures is a must and is being provided by a large number of EQUAL projects throughout Europe. They also mentioned that their projects have carried out research and studies to investigate the business environment, new markets and the development of new products. In the case of Deloa, the Paidea Galiza Foundation with long-standing experience in the social economy is the mainstay support. Under the name of Trébore (shamrock) sl, its [social economy enterprises](#) are operating in the areas of graphic design, horticulture and furniture restoration and all are renowned for the quality of both their products and their working conditions.

One participant from a social economy enterprise in Berlin felt that even when being highly professional, it is often impossible for such companies to increase the number of jobs they offer because of the lack of finance and the general slump in the economy. He urged local and regional governments to improve the access of the social economy to public procurement contracts and tenders. There were also several critical statements from the floor of the workshop about the existing legislative frameworks which hamper the development of cooperatives and social enterprises.

Other workshop participants drew attention to concept of “social capital”, highlighting that the success of social enterprises depends on maintaining good links with a number of different stakeholders. It was explained that “social capital” is made up of levels of trust, reciprocity, norms of behaviour, a sense of belonging and networks. This not only involves workers but suppliers, final users, customers from both the public and private sectors and the community generally.

IN CONCLUSION

Bert Boone felt that the EQUAL good practices presented had actually been scoring quite well when it came to giving convincing answers to the questions addressed by workshop. The different empowerment concepts had proved their validity as an integral part of inclusion pathways and had clearly enhanced the target groups’ opportunities to access employment. He also underlined the fact, that providing the most basic pre-conditions such as transport or childcare can also have an empowering effect. Finally, he believed that the achievements of the social economy that had been shared made a convincing case for the capacity of those enterprises to create lasting employment, rather than transitory solutions, for disadvantaged groups.

For more information:

More EQUAL experiences related to the topic can be found in three Policy Briefs: [Recognising your own Potential](#) – EQUAL assists people with disabilities to become actors in their own integration; [A Job Machine for Women](#) – EQUAL contributes to improving family services; [Management Skills for Social Enterprises](#) – New skills needed for staff in social enterprises.