

BUILDING ON NOTHING BUT GOODWILL

WORKING FOR PROGRES

PROGRES is the only Slovenian Development Partnership working under the EQUAL Asylum Seekers theme. The Partnership is led by [Ustanova fundacija GEA 2000](#) (GEA 2000) and has been active since 2004 primarily in developing flexible education programmes for asylum seekers. The partnership also aims at empowering its main target group by establishing a local network for employers willing to provide employment possibilities for asylum seekers and raising public awareness about the asylum issues. Urska Slibar, the coordinator of the Progres DP confessed: *“The initial idea of GEA 2000 was to offer any kind of activities to provide asylums seekers with the possibilities of personal and professional development. Now, within the EQUAL framework, we are trying to develop sustainable training programmes for this target group.”*

It is becoming ever harder to receive the refugee status in Slovenia. The 2006 amendments to the Asylum Act, first adopted in 1999, have retained only the bare minimum rights and reception standards for the asylum seekers as specified in the European Directives. In 1999 around 120 asylum seekers were granted the refugee status in Slovenia; the number was reduced to 27 in 2005 and only eight in 2006. The asylum process is further complicated by administrative and judicial red tape. *“From the approximate 120 asylum seekers that we have here, only two or three got the refugee status straight away after they lodged their application,”* said Ms. Slibar: *“All the others had to go through the appeal procedure in the Supreme Court and only received it with the third appeal. Something is wrong with the procedure, as it is clear that these people should get the refugee status earlier. The public authorities obviously have all the relevant information to grant the status much earlier, but they refuse to do so as they perceive asylum seekers as trouble makers unwilling to work.”*

This legal rollercoaster, the high overturn of the asylum seekers in the Ljubljana Asylum Home and the relatively short average length of the Asylum process in Slovenia – six to eight months – have resulted in a highly unstable situation. These factors make it difficult for the EQUAL partnership to develop and implement training programmes, which would be sustainable in long term. In this challenging context it is up to the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the project partners and others, to come up with the a list of training activities, coordinate these and give the time table to the Head of the Asylum Home or his deputy for acceptance. This coordination between the Development Partnership and the Asylum Home takes place in monthly meetings, organised by the NGOs, to present their agenda, solve problems and discuss the current issues. The agenda of the Asylum Home, including the times for the training and counselling, in then place on the information and its is the responsibility of the NGOs to “advertise” it. *“At times we go from door to door to find the people who could possibly be interested in our courses,”* said Ms Slibar.

TRAINING TO WORK AND INTEGRATE

There is no official training offer to asylum seekers from the side of the Slovenian State. However, 300 hours of Slovenian language training is obligatory for people who have received the refugee status. The paradox of this situation is that asylum seekers, as they are not allowed to work for the first 12 month after filing their application, have time for training, while refugees have to invest all their efforts in quickly finding employment as a means to survival after their release from the Asylum Home¹. The EQUAL partnership advocates for the training courses to

¹ “An applicant who has been granted the refugee status can stay in the Asylum Home or in other types of accommodation for a maximum period of 10 days” Rules on manners and requirements for exercising the rights of asylum seekers. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia* No. 121, dated 24.11.2006.

start once the asylum procedure is launched so that upon the reception of the refugee status, the person only has to focus on finding a job and integrating.

PROGRES practices what it preaches. The Partnership has developed a framework for asylum seeker training, which includes Slovenian language lessons, labour market orientation and measures introducing asylum seekers for to the Slovenian culture. In addition, the project allocates resources to its partners for the development of training and creation of new individual teaching methods for asylum seekers. The Partnership supports the testing of these training courses, which are then provided by its partner organisations and through the involvement of volunteers. Finally, the DP is also organising a range of mainstreaming events in which asylum seekers themselves can bring their positions to the attention of Slovenian citizens.

The EQUAL partner [Slovene Philanthropy](#), is developing and testing the Slovenian language courses. Philanthropy has been the main promoter of volunteering work in Slovenia since 1992 and is actively involved in providing psycho-social and health assistance to asylum seekers and refugees ever since. The Slovenian language courses are provided by Philanthropy's volunteers, which possess the relevant linguistic and pedagogical knowledge. At the moment these trainers are working to adjust the training programme to smaller groups of around 10 people and thinking about increasing the number of teachers for each course. The language instructors have noticed that asylum seekers make better progress if assisted by more than one teacher.

The Philanthropy also intends to develop a new training programme for women and children. This will be done by the use of self-help groups for women as their learning is often inhibited by men, who are against them learning Slovenian. There are also some women lacking motivation as they are convinced that education is not for them. As most of the asylum seekers come from the former Yugoslavia, the willingness learn is further hindered situation by Slovenians often speaking 'shared' third languages with asylum seekers. In order address all these issues, and to be able to mainstream the training and education methods used for the asylum seekers, the EQUAL partner is developing a handbook with learning models adapted to various asylum seeker target groups.

Philanthropy is providing the Slovenian lessons to asylum seekers two times a week. The courses take place in the Asylum Home and thus help the asylum seekers to avoid the costs of travelling and the NGOs from having to organise teaching premises. Upon graduation from the course, the participating asylum seekers should be able to speak, read and write in Slovenian. Neja Šmid, a member of the Philanthropy, said: *"We are satisfied with the great interest in our course. Some of the asylum seekers already have the basic knowledge necessary to communicate in Slovenian."*

PROGRES has also tested training aimed at introducing asylum seekers to the Slovenian labour market. The experimental course was initially offered to four women and four men, but after the first training the instructors realised that women were not expressing their opinion in front of men. After the course participants were split, it turned out that the female participants had some very specific and detailed ideas of what they liked to do. However, at the time when the training was provided only two of the participating asylum seekers were actually allowed to work. The problem with testing such training is that it just lasted only a couple of months: the asylum seekers were very disappointed when it finished. *"From the one side such testing of training programmes is good,"* said Ms Slibar: *"from the other you raise expectations and confuse asylum seekers, risking to loose their trust if you cannot offer permanent programmes as a follow up of this testing."*

Unfortunately, for financial reasons PROGRES had to put their labour market orientation and introduction to the Slovenian culture activities on hold. A training programme for the latter was indeed developed, but will have to remain on paper for now, as the testing would be too expensive considering the project's current financial situation. In stead, for the time being, the EQUAL partnership has decided to focus on awareness raising activities, which are more sustainable, offering wider benefits and requiring the minimum of resources.

ANYONE CAN BECOME A REFUGEE

Apart from the development and testing of the training courses, PROGRES also wishes to change the image of asylum seekers in Slovenia. [MATAFIR](#), an association for intercultural relations established in 2005 by students and young researchers at the Department for Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of Arts (University of Ljubljana) is the partner responsible raising public awareness on the plight of asylum seekers through various campaigns. MATAFIR is working on a voluntary, self-supporting and non-profit basis to promote the interests of immigrants, underprivileged groups, and the general public. Their work with asylum seekers is especially relevant because they are a relatively new phenomenon in Slovenia requiring new forms of education and information to the general public and policy makers. Alma Rogina, from the MATAFIR association, says: *"The image of asylum seekers in Slovenia is very bad. They are perceived as job stealers, thieves and exploiters of the system. In general people think that there is so much to be done for them that it is just not worth doing it. The goal of our events is to break these attitudes."*

The last big even organised by MATAFIR as part of the PROGRES was a mainstreaming conference organised on the World Refugee Day (20 June 2006). The main goal of the conference was to raise awareness among government representatives of the problems asylum seekers are facing in Slovenia through a round table discussion about the everyday obstacles asylum seekers face to access employment. During the conference, the various stakeholder present (NGOs, Government representatives, asylum seekers, refugees and 'Erased' people²) were informed about the employment situation and living conditions of asylum seekers. While some of the invited conference speakers were saying that the illegal work should be stopped, one of the first refugees employed publicly confessed that she had to first work illegally before she could access the labour market after having received the refugee status. *"Of course I was working on the black market!"* she said: *What else do you expect?"* Ms. Slibar commented this particular situation: *"All too often the public authorities hide behind the excuse 'It's the law!' in the discussions about how difficult it is to access employment after one year of exclusion from the labour market. Somehow in the context of asylum seekers the policy makers tend to forget that it is in their competence to change the law, if it's bad."*

The World Refugee Day conference was followed by a social evening in which the policy makers and the general public could interact directly with asylum seekers in an informal atmosphere. Almost all of the asylum seekers in Slovenia at that time came to the event. The programme of the afternoon was divided into two parts: one for children and one for adults. The children and youth could enjoy a puppet show, games and circus. The adults could assist in the various activities taking place continuously for asylum seekers and refugees. These included legal, consultations about employment, projections of documentary films developed by Slovenian NGOs, students and activists as well as sport games and jewellery-making workshop. During the event a prize was given for the best school essay entitled "Everybody can become a refugee", another MATAFIR activity intended to raise the awareness of youth and to explore their points of view on asylum issues. The programme of the social evening well stretched into the night with photo exhibitions, traditional cuisine prepared by asylum seekers, refugees' literary and musical performances, belly and folklore dancing, experimental theatre, etc., with the total cost of the whole event not exceeding €750!

MATAFIR intends to continue organising similar public awareness raising campaigns in the future. They are planning to transfer the location of the social gatherings from the city suburbs to the city centre in order to gain more public attention. A new competition is also planned for children, starting already in January 2007. With the help of EQUAL, MATAFIR is also planning to star in its own radio show to inform a wider public on the current issues and problems of asylum seekers.

Apart from raising the awareness of the general public and policy makers, the EQUAL partners MATAFIR, in cooperation with Consortium ŽIVA, which is active in the field of refugee integration and awareness raising, are also working to engage employers in asylum issues. The Development Partnership has undertaken a survey among the enterprises in the area to assess

² People who have no status at all although they have lived in Slovenia even before the independence.

the general employment situation and employers' awareness of asylum issues, with the aim of researching their willingness to employ asylum seekers. The level of interest in the issue and employer awareness about it was found very low – only 30 percent of the companies are aware of asylum seekers as possible employees and 78 percent of these would be interested in taking qualified asylum seekers as voluntary employees.

The Partnership is now planning a second, wider piece of research in this field, which takes stock of the methodological experience acquired during the first survey. The purpose of this second study will be to inform employers about asylum seekers as possible employees and then seek their cooperation in the provision of work places. PROGRES is aware that their activities will have only a partial success without the support of the employers. For example, in the context of the labour market orientation course, the EQUAL partnership was able to put asylum seekers in direct contact with the employers. However, with only a limited number of companies being aware of the benefits that asylum seekers can bring, this potential is not fully exploited.

THE FUTURE OF A PROJECT WITHOUT FINANCING

The partners united in PROGRES have been able to start their training and mainstreaming activities with the help of the EQUAL Community Initiative. Most of these activities will be sustainable after the end of the Development Partnership as they will be taken forward by its various partners. However, the end of the DP may come sooner than expected.

As the assets of the organisation responsible for managing the project were too small to obtain a bank guarantee, it was not possible to receive a loan to pre-finance the Partnership's activities. In order to overcome this issue and to ensure the continuity of the project, the EQUAL partnership signed a special financial agreement with the Ministry of Labour, which now has been terminated unilaterally by the latter. The activities of the Partnership continue to draw heavily on the personal commitment and investments of all GEA 2000 staff and their project partners, but it is not sure how this situation can be resolved. *"I'll work on this project as long as there is any possibility to continue. Not even in terms of finances... I just continue as long as I can,"* says Ms. Silbar: *"But once it's no longer possible, we'll have to quit."* *"We'll probably get through next month, but I do not know about the sustainability of our Partnership in the longer term,"* she adds sadly.

One of the partners, the [Jesuit Refugee Service \(JRS\)](#), no longer takes part in the DP, also due to financial reasons. They were expected to prepare the Information Technology (IT) training course, which now will not take place. The [Peace Institute](#) also withdrew from PROGRES when they realised how limited the budget of the EQUAL Partnership really was. However, some people from the institute have agreed to carry out the evaluation of the Partnership on their own initiative.

Despite these serious financial obstacles, there still remains a lot to be done with regard to the development and implementation of the asylum seeker training programmes in Slovenia. It will be particularly important to expand the training offer, to render training sustainable and to improve the understanding and attitude of staff working with asylum seekers. Franci Zlatar from the Philanthropy comments: *"It is quite hard to organise groups and teaching programmes, because the Ministry staff in the Asylum Home are not very interested. They think the asylum seekers will not be recognised as refugees anyway and are therefore not very motivated to participate."* Ms. Silbar agrees, adding that the people working with the asylum seekers are exposed to many different cultures, which may be at times confusing. She concludes that these people should be professionals with intercultural awareness rather than mere employees of the Ministry. EQUAL partner organisation ARX is working to improve this situation through the development of specialised training programmes aimed at promoting the intercultural competences among the social workers.

It will however take time to change the attitudes. The old 'power relations' must be changed as the present relations between the State and civil society lack equality. NGO assistance is only admitted for the implementation of activities the State approves of but does not want to do itself. The institutions still perceive themselves as authorities in charge rather than public servants. The EQUAL partnership is well on track in promoting the hard-needed change of attitudes among the staff working with asylum seekers and also the general public. But the journey ahead is long.

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