

STRATEGIC LESSONS EQUAL ASYLUM SEEKERS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the strategic policy lessons that have emerged from the theme related to the Social and Vocational Integration of Asylum Seekers under the EQUAL Community Initiative and that could be mainstreamed and integrated into the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF). It also highlights the main outcomes and conclusions from EQUAL partnerships that are linked to the thematic priorities of the European Social Fund and that could, in particular, support and stimulate cooperation in transnational networks, such as the platform on asylum seekers and victims of human trafficking which different ESF managing authorities are considering to create.

The strategic policy lessons are also set in their European dimension. Whilst the primary policy framework relates to the European Employment Strategy and the Social Policy Agenda, it is also important to consider the integration of asylum seekers in relation to the Common European Asylum System.

THE EQUAL COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

Funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), the EQUAL Community Initiative operated within eight themes linked directly to the European Employment Strategy (EES) and a ninth, which specifically promoted the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers. EQUAL differed from the European Social Fund mainstream programmes in its function as a laboratory (principle of innovation) and in its emphasis on active co-operation between Member States.

EQUAL was implemented in two periods, namely a first round (2000 – 2004) including all 'old' Member States (the EU15) and a second Round (2005 – 2007) covering the enlarged EU (EU25). The resources available for the activities within the theme varied according to the size of the country and the priority given. More than 200 Million euros were allocated to the Asylum Seekers Theme, financing nearly 100 Development Partnerships (DPs) in every Member State of the EU, including all New Member States, which in the second Round were requested to include at least one EQUAL partnership focusing on the social and integration of asylum seekers. In this sense, EQUAL Asylum Seekers differed from the other EQUAL themes, where the decision to implement Partnerships under a certain theme was left to the discretion of the New Member States.

For each EQUAL theme, a European Thematic Group was established to enhance learning through transfer and dissemination at an operational level between actors, to encourage mainstreaming of good practice to impact at European policy level, and to match good practice supply to policy demand. The European Thematic Group established for the Asylum Seekers Theme ([ETG5](#)) aimed to identify good practice and capture new ideas and lessons emerging from EQUAL that were having a positive impact on the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers in the EU. The ETG5 was led by representatives of the governments of Sweden and the Netherlands. In addition there has been close co-operation between DG [Employment and Social Affairs](#), DG [Justice, Freedom and Security](#) within the European Commission, and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles ([ECRE](#)) to ensure that the work focuses on the issues which are most relevant at EU level.

The ETG5's sub-themes were:

Advice, education and training

The sub-theme covered all activities which helped asylum seekers to find their way in the new society, to assist them with practical, social and psychological issues and to have their skills and competences assessed and validated. In addition, it also included all activities to help asylum seekers into education and training, including the development of specific programmes and methodologies.

Employment and employment relations

This sub-theme covered activities to help asylum seekers find a job, or, where legal employment was not possible, access other forms of work experience. This ranged from counselling, lobbying, mediation, work placements and volunteering to the organisation of employment fairs, direct lobbying with employers and the development of specific job profiles.

Capacity building and awareness-raising.

Around this sub-theme, activities focused on improving the skills and competences of people working with asylum seekers, research and studies to better understand the conditions in which asylum seekers live and initiatives to empower asylum seekers and to involve them in decision-making processes of the EQUAL partnerships. In addition, the sub-theme also included activities to involve the local community and to raise awareness with a wider public, through the organisation of events, campaigns and through the use of the media (television, film, radio, etc).

Empowerment was considered a horizontal issue throughout the work of the ETG5. It is of particular relevance to asylum seekers, who are amongst 'the least empowered' people in any host society. Asylum seekers have often little control over their lives while waiting for a decision on their application and are unable to take actively take part in the host society due to a range of restrictions, for example on access to education, training and employment. EQUAL partnerships explored many different ways to increase empowerment of asylum seekers, thus boosting their self-confidence and motivation.

Each of the sub-themes of EQUAL Asylum Seekers had its own specificities and characteristics. Whilst for example initiatives to get asylum seekers into mainstream schools met several bureaucratic hurdles, the activities aimed at involving the local community had to face initial xenophobic reactions and a general reluctance of people to take part.

The ETG5 launched a range of initiatives to support the EQUAL partnerships in the development of their practices and approaches, to promote exchanges of experience and transfer of good practices and to influence policy developments at national and EU levels.

Initiatives addressing the EQUAL Asylum Seekers theme as a whole included:

- The organisation of a European conference to present the main results of Round one to an audience of policy makers, Development Partnerships and other national and international actors active in the area of asylum.
- Support to the organisation of a European Policy Forum aimed at disseminating the main policy lessons and good practices emerging at the end of Round two.
- The preparation of Success Stories on more than 20 Development Partnerships and Transnational Partnerships and the publication of articles on events, funding, policy developments and other topics related to asylum.

The EQUAL Asylum Seekers theme occupied a special position in the political landscape of the EU. Whilst EQUAL as a whole was directly embedded in Employment and Social Policy and in particular the European Employment Strategy ([EES](#)), asylum was covered by another policy area, namely that of Freedom, Security and Justice. Since the late nineties, there have been a range of important developments in EU policy and legislation in relation to asylum, starting with the creation of a Common European Asylum System ([CEAS](#)) and followed by the adoption of several legislative instruments in its wake. One of the most important instruments relevant for EQUAL was the [Reception Directive](#)¹, aimed at guaranteeing a common quality of reception, services and opportunities for asylum seekers to integrate into their new society while waiting for a decision on their application. A summary overview of both sets of policies are included in Annex A to this paper.

¹ Short title for Council Directive 2003/9/EC laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers

STRATEGIC LESSONS OF EQUAL ASYLUM SEEKERS

The following three strategic lessons, with sub-lessons, have been identified:

Lesson 1. The integration and empowerment of asylum seekers should start upon arrival.

- 1.1 A holistic approach to integration is required;
- 1.2 The empowerment of asylum seekers should be an essential part of all activities targeted at their integration;
- 1.3 All persons working with asylum seekers should have the appropriate skills and knowledge.

Lesson 2. The employment of asylum seekers is an essential part of their integration

- 2.1 The usefulness of mediation and strong relations with employers, employer associations, social partners and other relevant stakeholders;
- 2.2 The need for creative approaches where access to employment is restricted.

Lesson 3. Skills audits can help vulnerable groups back into the labour market

- 3.1 Skills audits have an empowering effect on people;
- 3.2 Skills audits processes should be accompanied by mediation between vulnerable groups and employers, to ensure a smooth transition into employment;
- 3.3 Skills audits also help to support self-employment and business creation.

These are discussed in turn below.

LESSON 1. THE INTEGRATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF ASYLUM SEEKERS SHOULD START UPON ARRIVAL.

Lesson 1.1 A holistic approach to integration

Lesson: Early intervention favours both the integration (should they be granted a status) and reintegration (should they need to return to their country of origin) of asylum seekers. EQUAL Development Partnerships have shown that any activities aimed at the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers should start upon their arrival. This should consist of a holistic approach, including for example an assessment of their skills and competences; civic orientation, access to language training and access to vocational training incorporating a practical component. Both asylum seekers and society have strongly benefited from allowing them direct access to the labour market. The specific needs of disadvantaged groups of asylum seekers should be taken into account.

Asylum seekers leave their countries of origin to escape persecution and find refuge in a country which is considered to be safe. From the moment an asylum application is lodged to the time a decision is made, the asylum application process can take several months or even years. The (sometimes considerable) length of the asylum determination process, which risk leaving asylum seekers in a state of inactivity and disempowerment, underscores the importance of providing advice, education and training for asylum seekers upon arrival. Asylum seekers are eager to learn about the host society and make the most of his or her time while waiting for a decision. Good advice, orientation and personal support helps asylum seekers to become well informed about opportunities the host society has to offer. Many asylum seekers also bring valuable qualifications and skills with them and often have relevant work experience which could be put to use in the host country. Education and training programmes contributes to the development of professional skills and facilitates their integration within the local community while preparing them for entry in the labour market.

Activities relating to advice, education and training are influenced by the national regulatory and legal frameworks in which they are being implemented. In terms of vocational and/or language training, asylum seekers are still denied access to mainstream services in many Member States (e.g. the Czech Republic, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia). Another third of the EU Member States have opted for granting limited access to their national or regional education and training programme: Austria, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The final third do not impose any restrictions on asylum seekers who wish to pursue further education or vocational training (e.g. Belgium, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Malta and Portugal). However, as some of these do require asylum seekers to pay a registration fee (e.g. Belgium and Hungary), their de facto access is constrained.

Most EQUAL partnerships have been implementing multi-thematic activities, considering integration a process requiring support from arrival (e.g. advice, counselling, housing) to receiving a final decision (e.g. employment, further education or reintegration). The integration of asylum seekers not only consists of different stages, but also of multiple dimensions (e.g. housing, material assistance, social relationships, community involvement, education and labour market participation). This calls for the provision of a range of services and support structures for asylum seekers. These include for example access to language training, civic orientation, access to vocational training incorporating a practical component and an assessment of their skills and competences.

The following illustrates the delivery of an integrated training package for asylum seekers in Malta. It highlights the need for a holistic approach to the integration of asylum seekers.

Asylum Seekers Partnership (MT)

The Asylum Seekers Partnership in Malta has developed an integrated training package for asylum seekers, consisting of three consecutive modules: English language, 'life skills' and labour market orientation. The English literacy courses are often set outside the customary classrooms and make use of games. In addition to this informal format, the lessons are highly

interactive, placing the trainee at the centre of this learning experience. The labour market orientation module is also taught in small groups and has a strong focus on interview skills. The national trade union, which runs the course, drew on its extensive experience of job interviewing to identify key skills, such as communication and timeliness, and impart these to asylum seekers. The third module, 'life skills', is facilitated by two therapists, who encourage asylum seekers to share their experiences and expectations through games, writing and working together. Commenting on this comprehensive training package, Isabelle Sicott, one of the four team members, said: "You cannot successfully insert someone into the labour market when they have a lot of social problems. We therefore actually do a bit of everything" This holistic approach to the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers is also reflected in the creation of a small vocational guidance team of experienced social workers to encourage asylum seekers to join the newly established courses and to follow them from beginning to end.

In terms of the (combination of) different types of activities that are offered or organised by EQUAL partnerships to further the socio-economic integration of asylum seekers, a brief overview is presented below.

EQUAL partnerships often organise civic education for asylum seekers, which aims to the knowledge and skills needed for effective participation in the host community. This has not only helped asylum seekers to better understand and orientate themselves in the new society, but also benefited that society. The events organised in the framework of civic education, and the interactions and dialogues that these have sparked off between asylum seekers and members of the local community, have succeeded in fostering mutual understanding and respect.

In Sweden, [ARRIVAL GOTEORG](#), wanted to build on and strengthen the links of asylum seekers with the host country. They organised thematic courses on Swedish culture and society, and explained the wider asylum and migration context of the European Union. The courses were combined with study visits to some of the main companies and cultural institutions in the Gothenburg area, and theme days involving municipalities, the Migration Board and representatives of other institutions. The direct contacts established through these visits and events made Swedish officials and "normal" citizens understand much more what it meant to be seeking asylum and living in uncertainty.

The learning of at least one the official languages of the host country represents an essential starting point for asylum seekers to be able to act and interact with their new host society, to access and effectively use health and social care services, to enter employment and to establish relationships with host members. However, many asylum seekers still have minimal access to language courses. In some cases, their legal status does not match the national or regional requirements for further education or training; in others, the demand for language classes outstretches what is currently on offer and asylum seekers find themselves on long waiting lists. In response to this problem, several EQUAL projects have set up language courses for asylum seekers and/or opted for a hand-holding approach, informing them on what kinds of training are available to them within the Member State, how they can access it and providing them with practical and moral support throughout the process.

[EPIMA \(Austria\)](#) helps young asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minors, learn German while undergoing vocational training and practical work experience. Thanks to this training programme, they have been able to master the language and, more importantly, learn essential words and expressions in vocational areas such as car mechanics or hairdressing. Through on-the-job experience, participants have a chance to improve their vocational and language skills. Multi-media classes also allow them to communicate with people all over the world. The training module has given participants the possibility to talk with people in German, make new friends and prepare themselves for entering the labour market in sectors they're interested in.

Evidence from DP practices shows that asylum seekers learn a language quicker when their linguistic skills are directly applied in the context of vocational training or in a work environment. Moreover, the EQUAL experience has demonstrated that training courses which combine language with vocational training speed up the process of socio-vocational integration. It ensures that the period during which asylum seekers await the decision regarding their asylum application can be purposefully used to kick-start their integration process. In those Member States, where a

waiting period before entry to the labour market is in operation, EQUAL projects provide asylum seekers with the skills, knowledge and instruments to proceed with their integration once a permit to reside and work within the national territory has been granted. This not only reduces the feelings of being 'in limbo' that asylum seekers are otherwise exposed to, but it also accelerates their entry into the labour market and their contribution to the host society. Even if their application for asylum is turned down, it could be argued that the economic profile of the asylum seekers has been strengthened, as they gained skills and competences which might ultimately benefit them upon return to their home country or onward journey.

Some Member States are experiencing skill shortages in certain sectors, for example, Denmark and the UK are experiencing a shortage of doctors and nurses. Suitably qualified asylum seekers can fill these gaps. However, asylum seekers with medical qualifications often need to request formal accreditation of their skills and qualifications. In the UK, for example, the process is very lengthy, expensive and time-consuming, which can cause significant delays in access to employment and entail considerable costs. Consequently, several EQUAL partnerships have set up or liaised with organisations specialised in the assessment and validation of skills and knowledge.

Vias de Interculturalidade na Area do Asilo (VIAaS) (PT)

VIAAS has also engaged in a number of activities to facilitate the access of asylum seekers to the labour market and further their integration. It has teamed up with specialist organisations to assess and validate the skills and knowledge that asylum seekers have acquired. The resulting certificates allow them to secure a job in their field of expertise. In addition, asylum seekers are offered the opportunity to take vocational courses in three different sectors where labour shortages have been detected: butchers, service waiters and food inspectors. Finally, making employers aware of the competences that asylum seekers can bring to their company or organisation and of their right to work with a provisional residence permit is another important objective of the partnership.

Next to the design and delivery of (a combination of) services and support activities, the holistic approach to integration is also reflected in EQUAL partnerships' steps to create a 'one-stop-shop' where asylum seekers can learn which different types of services are available to address specific needs and how these are to be accessed in the future should these needs arise. For example, some DPs created sophisticated websites offering information to asylum seekers on where to go for education, legal advice, social and psychological support, etc. This renders asylum seekers more independent and autonomous in relation to their integration pathway.

ASSET UK partners have explored innovative ways of reaching out to asylum seekers no matter where they are and providing them with the information they need through the use of IT tools specially developed and designed with their needs in mind. The 'Information for Asylum Seekers' website (www.info-for-asylumseekers.org.uk) developed by **RAGU**, an Asset UK partner, is a user-friendly resource which provides asylum seekers with detailed and up-to-date on-line information which they are sure to find useful when exploring educational and volunteering opportunities in the UK, as well as other information. From the homepage, users can choose between seven colour-coded headings which guide them to information on improving their English, understanding the UK education system, getting into further or higher education, how to volunteer, how to prepare for the job market, how to get qualifications and experience recognised, and how to go through the process of re-qualification (for regulated professions such as doctors or architects, etc.). Translated summaries in eight of the most common languages spoken by asylum seekers in the UK are provided for those who do not have a sufficient level of English.

The experience of the EQUAL partnerships in the area of training make the case that activities aimed at the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers is a holistic process which should start upon their arrival. Member States which allow asylum seekers to access advice, training and education early on can testify to higher levels of motivation and faster integration in the case that asylum seekers receive a positive decision on their status. Asylum seekers faced with the necessity to return to their country of origin are also better prepared and more positive about their future.

Lesson 1.2 The empowerment of asylum seekers should be an essential part of all activities targeted at their integration.

Lesson: Asylum seekers should not be considered merely beneficiaries, but also active agents in their integration into society. EQUAL Development Partnerships have ensured the participation of asylum seekers in their own integration pathways, in the design of activities aimed at their integration, in project decision-making processes and in the provision of training and support to other asylum seekers. Such involvement has had a strong empowering effect, increasing their motivation and self-confidence.

The idea that asylum seekers are not merely beneficiaries, but also active agents in their integration into society lies at the heart of empowerment. Asylum seekers are subject to long waiting times and experience a lingering fear of being sent back to the country of origin. They are often in a position where other persons continuously speak and act on their behalf. This sense of dependency or disempowerment that asylum seekers experience in relation to the decision-making process on their asylum application is sometimes extended when they access other services or engage in other activities in the host society, which further reduces their autonomy, self-confidence and motivation. Furthermore, their skills and potential may not or hardly be recognized and they may have no or limited access to vocational training or the job market.

A key step towards the goal of empowerment is to recognise the skills, knowledge and resources that asylum seekers already possess and to help them in putting these to use in their everyday life in the new society. Asylum seekers need to be offered the opportunity to play a leading role in their personal integration process and in any decision-making on this process. Those working with asylum seekers should professionally pursue the aim of rendering asylum seekers autonomous and independent, i.e. (renewed) authors of their future. To determine how an individual or group of asylum seekers can be successfully empowered and with what expected result, professionals working with this target group need to map the knowledge, expertise, skills and resources of asylum seekers – what are they good at, what networks can they draw upon, what do they like to do, etc.

Some asylum seekers aspire to take up a particularly active role vis-à-vis the community or larger group of asylum seekers they belong to. These individuals may lie at the start of, or make a valuable contribution to, refugee- or other types of community-based organisations, self-help groups, etc. They may have become inspired by personal or communal experiences of deprivation, especially because they successfully overcame these.

The North London [Aspire Development Partnership \(UK\)](#) supports asylum seekers living in four North London boroughs by offering valuable services which aim to empower them to participate and contribute to their host community. The EQUAL partnership aims to develop the leadership capacities of its client directly while creating strong links with the local community through a community leadership training programme. Asylum seekers are encouraged to develop their leadership and motivational skills so that they can be more active and make a contribution to their local communities. First participants learn about regeneration and community policies, and how local, regional, national policies are formulated and implemented. Topics covering leadership theory, personal and motivational skills, communication skills, and team building empowers participants to realise their own potential and provides the motivation to engage and participate in their communities. Participants then have the opportunity to put the skills learned during the training programme into practice through volunteer placements with community organisations. This gives participants a chance to work together with other members of the wider community and to take an active role in local and national issues that are of concern to them.

There should however be no expectation or imposition on the asylum seeker to adopt an overly active role in his or her personal pathway to integration or that of his or her community. Some will prefer, and have the right, to remain service users and not service managers or personnel.

The format through which help or advice is best provided differs significantly among asylum seekers, but is not of lesser value and significance to the goal of empowerment. Many different formats have been developed, ranging from after-school or homework clubs for the children and young people, internships and vocational training for adults, civic orientation, self help groups,

and discussion forums. Informal contacts and gatherings, such as drinking tea, preparing food together, and conversations at the school gates may have an equally empowering impact. As to which practices and activities may be appropriate to empower asylum seekers, other social characteristics or dimensions are of importance (e.g. gender, age and cultural identity). Some EQUAL partnerships for example, have encountered problems when seeking to recruit female volunteers, as husbands or other family relatives may frown upon or even prohibit this type of participation in the public sphere. When considering empowering practices and activities, professionals thus need to take account of cultural practices and habits or actively draw upon these to strengthen the problem-solving skills of asylum seekers (e.g. performances staged where humour is used to narrate difficult experiences faced during flight or settlement into the host country).

EQUAL partnerships have provided a wealth of concrete examples of how asylum seekers can be empowered and with the result of improved personal well-being and socio-economic integration into the host society. Three types of empowerment have been pursued by these partnerships. Firstly, activities to empower vulnerable groups or individuals have been set. The following example demonstrates how support has been tailored to the characteristics of the asylum seekers targeted (e.g. in the example below: age) and to the empowerment goals set (e.g. in the example below: self-expression).

*The **Austrian EQUAL Partnership EPIMA** offers a variety of possibilities through creative art programmes for young asylum seekers (15-25 years, focus on unaccompanied) to tell their stories and communicate with the public. The participants have produced their own DVD and created postcards featuring their self-portraits and messages they want to “tell to the world”. The participants have organised cultural events like an intercultural cafe with catering and readings and an exhibition of photographs and photo-stories and discussions. One participant wrote a script for a play which was staged. The aim is to raise the empowerment of young asylum seekers and to improve awareness and understanding of this group in the local community. The combination of different subjects for basic education with creative possibilities for the young asylum seekers to talk on their own behalf and show their potential to the population of the host country has proven to be successful. The young participants have not only improved their language and other types of skills, but also experienced a stabilizing influence on their health.*

The idea that integration not only covers actions to strengthen the ability and capacity of new members to participate fully in society, but also requires actions to ensure that social systems (e.g. local community) are more inclusive towards existing and new members also lay at the inception of several empowering practices and activities devised by development partnerships. Hostile attitudes towards and negative imagery of asylum seekers fostered through, for example, the media or politicians function as an obstacle to (attempts of) empowerment. Some EU Member States are taking their first steps towards the development of a multicultural society. The arrival of asylum seekers may constitute a new phenomenon and may alter an otherwise demographically and culturally homogeneous population. Other countries may experience economic downfall, fanning the perception of migrants as threats to employment.

In these phases of societal development, grassroots level actions against racism and networking are of utmost importance in order to open society to the acceptance of asylum seekers migrants as fellow citizens. In order to foster an empowering environment – the second type of empowering activities, several activities were aimed to improve the interface between asylum seekers and the local community in which they are to integrate.

Vias de Interculturalidade na Area do Asilo (VIAaS) (PT)

The idea of creating a positive dialogue with the local community also framed the building of a new Reception Centre by the Portuguese Partnership VIAAS (Vias de Interculturalidade na Area do Asilo). As Dr. Maria Teresa Tito de Morais Mendes, the director of Portuguese Refugee Council, explained. “We wanted to create a place where asylum seekers and Portuguese citizens get to meet naturally whilst enjoying leisure activities and ensure that asylum seekers do not become isolated in the outskirts of the city.” The centre now provides a new venue for hosting bands and theatre groups, a day care centre for children where asylum seekers’ children are placed together with Portuguese children, a public garden and sports facilities where the newly arrived get the opportunity to enjoy games together with their peers from Portugal.

In addition, several EQUAL partnerships undertook steps to ensure the participation of asylum seekers in the planning, implementation and evaluation of projects throughout the programme. The knowledge and skills gained through consultation and participation experiences benefit asylum seekers in relation to their wider participation in the new social environment, in order for it to take account of their presence, needs and interests.

*The Advisory Group's work (AG), established by the **UK EQUAL partnership EASI**, addresses the general lack of meaningful consultation and involvement of beneficiaries in the design of programmes. In many cases beneficiary consultation takes place too late or at a level that has little eventual impact on the proposed project. The creation of and work of the AG was to assist in overcoming the invisible barriers between service providers and beneficiaries to create a mutually beneficial partnership between the two groups. The level of support and training offered to the AG recognises the vulnerable and socially excluded position many asylum seekers occupy and aims to empower members to become skilled, engaged and confident in their role. An acknowledgment of members' existing skills, knowledge and expertise is crucial to empowering the AG members. In addition, in order to develop a group that felt able to confidently participate in consultation and meetings, further development of specific skills was identified by the AG members and has been met through customised training.*

Thirdly, other partnerships target employers in the public and private sector to facilitate asylum seekers' access to the labour market (see more detailed discussion under Lesson 2). The example below illustrates the success deriving from a training course developed by an EQUAL partnership for asylum seeker volunteers. The key objective was to support them in their role within the service. The positive contribution made by these trained asylum seekers to the service resulted in sustained recruitment of asylum seekers by the service in question and by employers in sister organisations.

*The Maryhill Citizens' Advice Bureau, a partner of the development partnership of **ATLAS** in **Scotland**, developed a tailored training package for asylum seeker volunteers, who following training, acted as advisers offering support to other asylum seekers. This training package was adapted from the Bureau's mainstream training programme by adding components including one-to-one language support for technical terms used in everyday work concerning benefits and housing, for example. An interesting by-product of this model was the development of a training dictionary compiling technical terms as well as slang words and phrases commonly used in Glasgow. Once trained, asylum seeker volunteers were able to assist all of the Bureau's clients and not only asylum seekers, bringing them into contact with the host community and in this way assisting their integration. A quarter of volunteers at Maryhill Citizens' Advice Bureau are now asylum seekers or refugees, offering services in more than 20 languages to their clients. This successful model is currently being implemented in Citizens' Advice Bureaux in Greater Pollok and Parkhead (in Glasgow). There has also been interest in the project from other Bureaux located in England. The Scottish Executive is providing the necessary funding for the extension of this programme to other Citizens' Advice Bureau offices.*

The key issue is that professionals give asylum seekers access to different types of empowering practices and activities. Often asylum seekers already engage in empowering activities – although it is not labelled as such – and the role of the service manager or staff member is merely to facilitate or support this activity through, for example, providing material or financial resources, making a meeting room available, and bringing potential interested parties in contact with those already participating.

Lesson 1.3 All persons working with asylum seekers should have the appropriate skills and knowledge

Lesson: Basic training or other forms of standard preparation for all those who work with asylum seekers in a professional capacity (public, private or voluntary sector) should form a practical component of the Common European Asylum System. Such training should be adapted to the particular context of the host country and be pitched at different levels of complexity, depending on the role and the function of the employees and the skills required to undertake their tasks. EQUAL Development Partnerships have developed several interesting approaches to such training, including university courses for staff in reception centres.

As set out in Article 24 of the Reception Directive, a key priority for EQUAL Partnerships has been to ensure that those who are expected to support the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers in the labour market and the society at large have the necessary skills and resources to do so. The work undertaken by the EQUAL Partnerships has uncovered a high level of need for capacity building among organisations whose target group includes, (or is supposed to include), asylum seekers. The lack of qualified personnel is a recurring problem. In general, employers, local policy-makers and members of the community were often found to have a limited, and distorted, understanding of the situation and legal rights of asylum seekers. This is often the direct result of incorrect or incomplete media coverage and the 'abuse' of information by politicians, which leads them to confuse asylum seekers with irregular migrants and assume that all asylum seekers are living comfortably on state welfare. These biased, negative images of asylum seekers, and the reserved and often hostile attitudes that these feed, serve only too often as an excuse to avoid confronting the issues that emerge as asylum seekers arrive in the territory and seek to integrate in their new host communities.

Training those working with asylum seekers, whether in the public, private or voluntary sector, is almost compulsory in order to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of services and facilities. EQUAL partnerships have designed and delivered training programmes for those who work with asylum seekers in a professional capacity. Staff and other persons in contact with asylum seekers need to understand the specific conditions, needs and expectations of asylum seekers in terms of regulatory challenges, labour market information, cultural and psychological issues, etc. Project workers need to be well-informed of their clients' rights and obligations, in order not to misinform and confuse them. Time and time again EQUAL has shown that good operators are able to provide their clients with the best services and point them to the best opportunities. They can help asylum seekers to make these few small steps, moving them out of isolation and straight into society.

ASAP – Transnational partnership

The goal of one of its working groups was to produce guidelines for developing a (trans-national) accredited qualification for those working with asylum seekers. It hereby recognised the EU-wide need for capacity building of those individuals and/or organisations involved in furthering the socio-vocational training of asylum seekers. This need was perceived as particularly high in EU Member States where the arrival of asylum seekers constituted a relatively new process or where the increase in their numbers resulted in the (over)stretching of institutional resources. The production of toolkits on the knowledge and skills that these professionals should acquire and on the methods and techniques on transferring these was seen as essential for ensuring similar standards of reception and integration of asylum seekers arriving in the European Union. These toolkits were to allow partner, but also other EU, countries 'to develop qualifications based on their specific educational structure and asylum procedures' (Maggie Lennon, The Bridges Programme, Scotland).

EQUAL partnerships provided examples of the formats through which practitioners were trained and guided. These included workshops for outreach workers, training sessions for university staff and coaching of those working with asylum seekers. Short training sessions including a variety of topics (e.g. the national asylum process and context, services available to asylum seekers, conflict resolution) provided through different methods (group discussions, case studies, role play) had been quite successful, as well as learning days which provided opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees to meet and discuss with practitioners.

Becoming More Visible (FI)

The Finnish EQUAL partnership developed, in collaboration with the University of Joensuu, a supplementary study programme for staff working in the 13 reception centres across Finland. The content of the programme was based on a needs assessment conducted in the centres, which showed that, although many people had vast experience of working with asylum seekers, there were still a number of areas in which their skills and knowledge could be further increased.

The study programme was divided into four courses on different subjects. Participants could either follow the whole programme or opt for an individual course which matched their needs. At the end of the programme, the students were asked to prepare a final assignment. Some of these used this opportunity to increase the quality of the services provided in the reception centre they worked in. Teachers and lecturers not only included university staff, but also specialists such as lawyers and psychiatrists, employees from the Refugee Advice Centre and from the Directorate of Immigration. The programme, or its individual courses, was attended by 38 students. Of these, 24 went through the full programme.

“The training developed has been a great success”, comments Pauli Heikkinen, manager of the EQUAL partnership. “The involvement of the university means that the programme is accredited and that its high quality is ensured. The courses have increased knowledge and skills of participants and therefore enhanced the quality of the reception services. We have presented its first outcomes to the national meeting of directors of reception centres, who have committed themselves to provide funding for the 2008 version, which is likely to be coordinated directly by the Ministry of Labour. We hope that one day it will become a compulsory part of the induction of new staff in reception centres.”

As to the topics, training courses for people working with asylum seekers should include some common basic elements (e.g. EU and national legislative and policy frameworks on asylum) and then be further specialised to the type of job / function (e.g. staff advising asylum seekers need to learn all about services available, whilst trainers need to focus more on asylum seeker backgrounds and options for accessing vocational programmes or employment). The experience of EQUAL partnerships has shown that training works best when it is adapted to a particular national context and tailored to the role and tasks of the persons participating in the courses.

Development partnerships that placed a high emphasis on both the “hard” and the “soft” skills of their workers enabled them to deliver better services. The “softer” skills are important for practitioners to develop good relations with their clients, while the more technical skills give people the right background knowledge to provide reliable information. People working with asylum seekers have to be prepared to deal with severely traumatised persons, people waiting anxiously for a decision – which sometimes takes years to arrive - and persons who have to deal with negative, life-changing news in case their application is rejected.

The Irish partnership [SONAS](#) hired and trained four outreach workers who could provide direct support to asylum seekers and act as ‘links’ to support services and public authorities. In order to become outreach workers, trainees had to follow a range of short-term sessions which comprised experiential learning, group discussions, case studies, role play and theoretical inputs, to best prepare them for their future tasks. Reaching out meant in the case of SONAS that the workers were constantly travelling and visiting reception and accommodation centres, and other organisations such as health services, to help asylum seekers find their way in the new society.

During the two years the project ran, SONAS outreach workers assisted 1,194 asylum seekers by providing them with information on the asylum procedure and important legislative changes, their rights and entitlements, welfare provisions, as well as other useful information, such as opportunities for voluntary work. Another important aspect of outreach workers’ work was to explain public attitudes to asylum seekers and vice versa, acting as a cultural bridge between them and the service providers they came in contact with. In this way, they were able to tackle misconceptions and raise awareness in the host community

But project workers are not the only ones who have to provide good services to people in need of support. Several EQUAL partnerships also tried to change the attitudes of other actors dealing with asylum seekers, such as civil servants processing their applications, or physicians

examining them. Here again making people aware of the special situation of asylum seekers helped to improve the quality of their services. Hence, EQUAL partnerships have underscored the importance of raising awareness among, building the capacity of and cooperating with strategic partners, other organisations and the wider population.

Partnerships have encouraged providers of healthcare and social services to critically reflect on the diversity management of their institution or organisation. The increasing competition with the European Union enlargement and the continuing migration flows may provide challenges as well as business opportunities that imply rethinking the service orientation strategies and human resources management approaches within healthcare and social services.

Some DPs offer courses to those working within social and pedagogical services, carers and healthcare providers, doctors, psychologists and psychotherapists, with the aim of developing a more efficient service provision for asylum seekers and migrants in both the healthcare and social domain.

INTEG.R.A in Italy developed a training programme for core administrative staff in local and regional authorities. Since the process for applying for asylum has been decentralised, civil servants with little previous experience had to not only learn how such procedures worked, but also how to deal with a new client group. The courses set up by the Italian partnership helped them to understand the specific conditions of asylum seekers and to improve their services. They were also better able to refer asylum seekers to other information and support structures.

The German partnership **SPUK** invited civil servants to give lectures to asylum seekers. While the primary goal of these sessions was of course to give information to asylum seekers on the application process, their rights and obligations, etc., the meetings had an important additional goal. The lectures helped to create a real dialogue between the group of asylum seekers and the lecturer. Through this direct personal contact, civil servants became much “closer” to their client group than they would normally do, which in most cases led to better understanding and empathy.

In a context where central government systems were lacking or where national resources were insufficient, networking tools often provided an excellent solution for NGOs, local authorities and other agencies dealing with the reception, support and integration of asylum seekers. The tools helped to increase efficiency and reduce overlaps in services (due to the many stakeholders involved) and to improve communication and coordination by showing “who did what, where and to what extent”.

LESSON 2. THE EMPLOYMENT OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THEIR INTEGRATION

Employment is a crucial element in the integration pathway of asylum seekers, as it makes them self-sufficient and in control of their lives. Even though their employment might be of a temporary nature in case their application is rejected, such a short period of gainful activity is also very important for their successful reintegration. Moreover, asylum seekers can bring great value to an organisation and the overall community if they are allowed to work.

Lesson 2.1 The usefulness of mediation and strong relations with employers, employer associations, social partners and other relevant stakeholders

Lesson: Private and public employers are often not aware that they can hire asylum seekers or are reluctant to do so because of the lengthy administrative procedures. EQUAL Development Partnerships have made substantial efforts to 'make the case' to employers, employer associations, employment services, social partners and other actors for hiring asylum seekers. Mediators, job-matching services, coaching and awareness raising campaigns have been, for example, very helpful in this regard. Employers have not only realised the potential and significant contributions that asylum seekers can make to their organisations, but have also benefited from inter-cultural learning and diversity on the work-floor.

Only in very few countries asylum seekers have direct access to the labour market. The majority of Member States require them to wait a set period of time (in line with the Reception Directive) before they can start looking actively for a job. The national legislation of several Member States now foresees asylum seekers seeking entry to the labour market one year after they have lodged their asylum claim (e.g. the Czech Republic, France², Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and the United Kingdom). Others have moved beyond the minimum standards enshrined in the Reception Directive and are giving asylum seekers the opportunity to pursue employment after 9 months (e.g. Luxembourg), 6 months (Italy, the Netherlands and Spain) or even 3 months (e.g. Austria and Finland). Portugal and Greece are amongst the Member States with the shortest waiting time before asylum seekers are allowed to start working. In Sweden, an asylum applicant is allowed immediate access if the Swedish Migration Board expects that the time to process the application will take more than four months. Asylum seekers still cannot work in Lithuania, the national legislation of which is in violation with Article 11 of the Reception Directive even after transposition, and in Denmark and Ireland, which both opted out of the Directive.

Employers and employer organisations are often not aware that asylum seekers are allowed to work. Even when made aware, they are often put off by the lengthy and complicated administrative procedures in some countries for obtaining a work permit. In some Member States where a social security number is required for all workers, asylum seekers may have difficulty applying for such a number. For example, in Sweden, asylum seekers need to contact the tax authority in order to request a social security number but many employers are not aware of this. Employers are also reluctant to hire asylum seekers and to invest the time and effort it takes to train them as they see them as temporary residents who may have to leave the country at any given moment. Public and private employment services are often unable to help asylum seekers as they cannot provide services to a client who may only be in the country for a few months and who requires special treatment in terms of administrative processing.

Through their activities, DPs managed to build strong and useful relations with a wide spectrum of actors relevant for getting asylum seekers into employment. Clearly all projects included the participation of employers (public and private sector) and most worked together with public employment services. Strong links were also created with regional and local authorities and

2 « L'étranger qui a demandé l'asile n'a, en principe, pas le droit de travailler. Toutefois, il peut déposer une demande d'autorisation de travail lorsque l'Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides (OFPRA) n'a pas statué dans le délai d'un an suivant l'enregistrement de sa demande d'asile, pour des raisons dont il n'est pas responsable. » [Code de l'entrée et du séjour des étrangers et du droit d'asile](#)

training institutes. Other relevant actors included employer organisations (e.g. Confederations), employee organisations (e.g. trade unions) and, interestingly, other types of employment services (e.g. private temping agencies) to ensure job referrals. Few DPs also included cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce.

DPs applied a wide range of approaches to engage employers and to convince them of the benefits of hiring asylum seekers. Most projects used mediation, which usually consisted of individuals approaching employers directly, providing them with information on the DP and convincing them to participate. The face-to-face method was very successful, especially when undertaken by persons employers believe to be “credible”. One DP for example used retired managers as middlemen, who were able to make use of their old networks to obtain internships for asylum seekers.

Other approaches often included lobbying, campaigning and networking. DPs also experimented with more formal approaches, such as signing agreements with actors committing them to hiring a certain number of asylum seekers, or to ensure their placement in companies. DPs also used events, such as conferences, seminars, information sessions and press sessions to raise awareness and attract employers. As to press involvement, the often quite negative media coverage can only be changed by clearly explaining the situation of asylum seekers to journalists.

*The **Spanish DP ENEAS – EQUAL** has developed collaboration agreements with the final aim to help asylum seekers into employment. One example refers to a collaboration agreement between a regional authority, a training provider and a public reception centre for asylum seekers run by IMSERSO (Institute of Elderly and Social Affairs). The agreement concerns integrating asylum seekers into a regular vocational training programme with the potential of receiving a work contract in case of successful completion of the courses. Through its continuation under Round 2, ENEAS EQUAL is expanding the collaboration agreements further across the full national territory. A regional television station in Andalucía has helped the Development Partnership to develop a DVD which is used to convince employers to enter such agreements. The DVD describes the purpose and benefits of the job placements and shows interviews with asylum seekers, employers and representatives of training organisations. The reaction to the DVD are very positive, attracting substantial interest from employers interested in taking part in the scheme.*

EQUAL highlighted the need to identify and ‘document’ the skills and competences of asylum seekers, as they either arrive without any certificates or have diplomas which need to be formally recognised, which is a time-consuming process. Nearly all partnerships helped asylum seekers to identify, describe and present their skills and qualifications, by developing CVs, portfolios and skills audits. Such activities were undertaken through individual sessions with asylum seekers, in workshops and through self-assessments. The profiles were sent to interested employers, or presented by mediators and/or the asylum seekers themselves.

Several went further and developed so-called matching systems, combining demand for labour with offers. In a few cases, specific databases were developed storing asylum seeker profiles and company job adverts. These databases were accessible online to ensure a wide user access. However, other types of matching included more face-to-face approaches, such as the organisation of “recruitment fairs” and other types of meetings where employers and potential employees could come together.

Human step (CZ)

In the Czech Republic asylum seekers can access work after having spent one year in the country. However, while many asylum seekers wait longer than this for a final decision on their application, only very few obtain declared jobs. The EQUAL project ‘Human Step’ is trying to change this through the creation of an employment agency that matches asylum seekers with job offers. The partner organisation Human resources, a recruitment agency with direct access to employers and job opportunities, plays an important role to achieve this. Other project partners include PR and IT specialists, and language and socio-culture educators. The partners have been hand-picked to find and achieve good relations with potential employers, and prepare asylum seekers to take on a job through, for example, the provision of language and Czech

culture training. Awareness raising is also organised in the local community in order to increase knowledge about asylum seekers and decrease xenophobia.

For the matching of jobs, the partnership compiles lists of potential employers including large companies in, for example, the automobile, brewery, porcelain and aerospace and transportation industries. The most relevant posts are identified for the clients (asylum seekers) according to a set of criteria, including Czech language skills, willingness to move to other parts of the country, employment preferences and interests. After having interviewed an asylum seeker, the Human Step team suggests potential posts, offering those who qualify a few placements to choose from. The partnership also arranges accompanied visits to the employers to facilitate the first contact between the asylum seekers and the companies. At the start of 2007, 60 companies in different areas had been contacted, and 50 asylum seekers had expressed their interest in language training.

Employers and related organisations seemed to be much more “at ease” when convinced that they would not have the sole “responsibility” for the newly hired person, and were not “alone” when having to deal with administrative, cultural, linguistic or other problems that could arise. For this purpose (and of course in order to support the asylum seekers), DPs proposed accompanying activities such as mentoring / tutoring, language assistance, etc. Where required, DP staff helped asylum seekers to obtain the permits necessary for accessing the labour market, as the often very bureaucratic procedures would have only discouraged the employers, had they been made responsible for this.

Referral and mediation (agencies) were also used by some DPs. Mediators would, either in the company of asylum seekers or by themselves, visit employers to discuss their needs (in terms of skills, qualifications, etc) and to propose specific profiles available within the project. DPs sometimes proposed short trial periods for asylum seekers so that employers could first see whether they matched their expectations on the work floor. This however raised issues of social security and liability, as such experiences are often not agreed contractually.

Information packages, explaining the legal and social situation of asylum seekers and providing guidance as to the various procedures to be followed for hiring them were also developed. Other tools mentioned included the organisation of study visits to companies and the organisation of meetings with employers and related actors.

The DPs emphasised that in order to convince employers, it was essential to be realistic about the potential employee(s) and to not exaggerate their language or technical skills as this would only lead to disappointments and decreased interest in hiring further asylum seekers. Also, asylum seekers should not be “victimised” when being presented to employers: they should be hired for their skills and potential, and certainly not out of pity.

Most of the work experiences accessed by asylum seekers concerned traineeships, internships and on-the-job training. The nature of these work experiences varied greatly in terms of duration and scope. In general, short-term training (a couple of weeks) in the work place was usually part of a wider vocational programme, prior to accessing “real” employment. In a few cases, short-term internships were used to convince employers to hire the respective asylum seeker (e.g. in Greece). Long-term traineeships were either meant as a thorough preparation period for a job requiring specific skills and experience or, to some extent, meant to “compensate” for access to the labour market being prohibited. However, several DPs helped asylum seekers to access “real” employment opportunities. Sometimes, as indicated above, traineeships were used to up-skill participants or to show their capabilities to hesitant employers.

The types of jobs and work experiences offered varied but most were temporary/seasonal or in areas experiencing shortages of manual, low-skilled staff. However, some DPs were able to create new employment opportunities specifically geared towards asylum seekers, making the maximum use of their cultural backgrounds and language skills (see next section). A minority of the projects addressed the highly-skilled, such as doctors and engineers, but their experiences are showing some very positive results in terms of asylum seeker integration.

As to the impact on the company or organisation, the employers were genuinely interested and willing to hire more asylum seekers after their first experiences. This shows that the initial

reluctance to hire asylum seekers can be relatively easily overcome, as it is caused by “ignorance” and lack of awareness rather than by racism or sheer unwillingness / disinterest. It also testifies the overall success of EQUAL in promoting the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers.

[IntegRarsi \(IT\)](#)

Started in Round 1 as Integ.R.A., this EQUAL partnership has successfully managed to set up a nation-wide network of local steering groups, bringing together public authorities, NGOs, healthcare and social services and other relevant organisations to create an all-embracing “integration path” for asylum seekers arriving in Italy. The very high number of beneficiaries (asylum seekers and refugees) gives clear evidence of the success of the partnership: from 2002 to 2004 895 persons received information and orientation services.

IntegRarsi also focuses on the development of vocational training and work experiences. The project has successfully managed to engage both public and private employers in the individualised integration pathways that are being developed for asylum seekers. One of these employers is IKEA, which hired a group of newcomers whom in 2007 are still working in their shops in Italy. While corporate social responsibility was a strong driver in IKEA’s decision to team up with the EQUAL partnership, the multi-national was mainly convinced by the asylum seekers’ very high levels of training. Prior to their first interviews, beneficiaries had gone through a long process of language courses, labour market preparation, skills assessments and matching vocational programmes and interview training. Several new employment opportunities have subsequently been opened up to asylum seekers and refugees as a consequence of the project.

Employers committed to EQUAL Asylum Seekers for different reasons. For those from the private sector, one of the primary grounds for hiring asylum was related to economic interest, often because of labour shortages in general or the shortage of specific skills. However, increasingly employers also consider corporate social responsibility as a key incentive for hiring those that may have more difficulties to enter the labour market. Many employers were interested in employing asylum seekers for humanitarian reasons, for the purpose of enhancing cultural understanding and with the aim to ensure increased diversity in the workplace.

The EQUAL partnerships showed that company environments can change because of the presence of asylum seekers. Employers and staff often changed their perception of this disadvantaged group, thus gaining a better understanding of their situation, and referred to a process of intercultural learning that was initiated. In some cases, employers were willing to offer permanent contracts or contract extensions to asylum seekers once they had started working for them. In short, many employers started to consider the issue of hiring asylum seekers “business as usual” rather than something as exceptional or simply impossible. Such a change in attitude was particularly evident in areas and sectors experiencing skills shortages.

The positive effects that were a result of the DP activities were not limited to the individual companies: other actors involved in employment activities, such as training institutes, agencies / authorities providing work permits, employment services, etc also became aware of the benefits of enabling asylum seekers to access the labour market and often adopted a more collaborative, flexible and open attitude. This was also beneficial for the employers as it led to a better compliance between the provision of training and their skill demands. When looking at wider impacts on the community, effects noted included reduced racism / xenophobia, reduced reliance on the host society in terms of welfare costs, and lower numbers of asylum seekers working on the black market.

Lesson 2.2 The need for creative approaches where access to employment is restricted

Lesson: Several EQUAL Partnerships generated new types of work experience and jobs for asylum seekers in Member States with a tight labour market and restricted access to the labour market. In some countries, asylum seekers can only engage in certain types of work or can only access jobs for which there is a proven skills shortage or for which no EU citizens can be found. The creation of new vocational profiles and/or the uncovering of niches in the labour market proved a particularly successful strategy of integrating asylum seekers into the national labour force while avoiding competition with, and apprehension from, the national workforce.

Some countries have placed additional restrictions on labour market access for asylum seekers, for example on the duration or the type of employment that can be accessed by asylum seekers, or they prioritise job openings to nationals and EU citizens. Only very few Member States still allow asylum seekers to work after having received a first negative decision on their application. As many countries have reduced the asylum procedure to a few months, this means that in some national contexts it will be practically impossible to get asylum seekers into employment.

Within this context, the EQUAL Partnerships have devised a range of innovative strategies to promote the employment of asylum seekers. In Member States prohibiting employment for asylum seekers, there are also opportunities for traineeships and work shadowing placements which can help an asylum seeker become familiar with working norms and gain valuable experience. Employers can sometimes be reluctant to offer such possibilities to asylum seekers, as they are often unaware that this is legal. DPs have overcome these obstacles and successfully set up work placements with an employer which matches the asylum seeker's experience and skills to the employer's needs.

The Bridges Project is one such work experience/work-shadowing scheme operated in Glasgow, Scotland by the ATLAS DP which provides asylum seekers with valuable work experience while promoting cross-cultural learning within the local community and thus breaking down barriers. A description of the practice is provided below:

The Bridges Project is a work-shadowing scheme operated in Glasgow by the [ATLAS DP](#). The aim of the project is to break down negative barriers between the asylum seeker community and employers and help asylum seekers to gain professional experience. Scotland is in a unique position in the UK because it is experiencing a skills shortage, its population is ageing rapidly and it has a low birth-rate. Approximately 65% of asylum seekers in Glasgow are educated to degree level or above and have a wide range of skills. Before coming to the UK, they worked as academics, managers of companies, surveyors, engineers, architects, accountants, office and catering staff, etc. Many are also highly-skilled artisans. 66% of asylum seekers are granted permission to stay and a lot of them decide to settle in Scotland.

The work-shadowing scheme is open to all asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. Participants need to have a reasonable standard of English to participate. Asylum seekers learn about the Bridges Project through different referral points (i.e. the Scottish Refugee Council or other voluntary organisations and colleges throughout Glasgow), or word of mouth. The work-shadowing placements are in the following fields: medicine, teaching, building/engineering, administration, legal and financial, amongst others.

The Project sends tailored letters to potential employers explaining the work-shadowing scheme. Word of mouth seems to work very well, especially in the public sector, as local authorities are influenced by what other local authorities do, as are health boards. Once a few employers decided to participate, this had a domino effect with many others wanting to take part. The companies who sign up tend to have a strong sense of corporate social responsibility or see the scheme as a way of achieving ethnic minority targets or addressing skills shortages. The project managers also speak at conferences and events to promote the project. The project is very good at getting media coverage of their work.

When an asylum seeker contacts the Project, an informal meeting is set up to discuss their skills and qualifications, previous work experience, and expectations. A database has been set up with

information on participants' occupational qualifications, the number of years of experience, etc. which is used to match candidates with employers. The project managers know the asylum seekers well and are able to recommend candidates with suitable qualifications. Placements usually run for 12 weeks with a minimum participation of one day a week. Participants can take part more than once a week if they wish, in agreement with the employer. Support is provided to the participants in the form of an allowance which covers the cost of travel fare and lunch. The project is examining ways to give asylum seekers who complete a work-shadowing placement formal accreditation should they wish to undertake formal study or to demonstrate to future employers that they have work experience.

Through the work-shadowing experience, participants have the opportunity to learn about local work habits and cultural differences and gain valuable professional experience, which prepares them for future employment. Asylum seekers have reported feeling glad to be able to access their professional field and to have some control over their lives again. There is evidence that asylum seekers who are learning English and participating in a work-shadowing placement show rapid progress and are highly motivated to continue with their professional development. The placements also provide an opportunity for asylum seekers to access places outside their immediate neighbourhood and enter in contact with the wider society. By working alongside asylum seekers, the local community has had an opportunity to learn about different cultures and the plight of asylum seekers, thus changing public perceptions and attitudes. All but one of the employers who offered a placement to an asylum seeker through the Bridges Project have been willing to repeat the process and take on more placements. After gaining refugee status, some participants have found employment as a result of having taken part in the work-shadowing scheme and sometimes with the employers with whom they have shadowed.

Voluntary work has proven to be another effective option to favour the integration of asylum seekers and increase their self-confidence while stimulating an intercultural learning process with the local community and employers. Where possible, it can promote access to regular employment as the asylum seekers can show proof of experience in the host country and may have the opportunity to network with employers to promote their skills.

ESELY (HU)

The Hungarian Partnership ESELY provides asylum seekers with the opportunity to obtain vocational training and work experience through volunteering. Inspired by a similar practice in their transnational partner in the UK, this Partnership decided to draw upon Act 86/2005 stipulating that a publicly funded organisation can employ volunteers. ESELY joined hands with the Northern Great Plain Regional Labour Centre Regional Branch Office Debrecen., turning it into the first employment agency to recruit asylum seekers as volunteers. With the assistance of a social worker, four asylum seekers were subsequently appointed, selected according to their skills, training needs and interests.

Those participating in this project have benefited in that they have gained vocational skills and insights into the functioning of a public administration organisation. In general, the experience of volunteering has allowed asylum seekers to practice and refine their language skills, to acquaint themselves with the local customs and values and extend their social network. Ultimately, this kind of training and information promotes their integration into Hungarian society. For their colleagues, working side by side with asylum seekers has forced them to question their perceptions and attitudes towards asylum seekers and to challenge the discriminative practices they observe in their day-to-day job.

Partnerships have generated new types of work experience and jobs for asylum seekers in Member States with a tight labour market and restricted access to the labour market. The creation of new vocational profiles and/or the uncovering of niches in the labour market have proven particularly successful strategies for integrating asylum seekers into the national labour force while avoiding competition with, and apprehension from, the national workforce. As asylum seekers bring skills and competences to jobs that nationals or other EU citizens struggle to provide, it also becomes easier for the employer to show that reverting to the national labour market force is not an option.

TransKom (DE)

In Germany, asylum seekers may only apply for a work permit after having spent one year in the country, and in certain sectors under the condition that no German or other EU citizen is available for the job. In Round 1 of EQUAL the 'TransSpuK' partnership developed a new job profile within the SpraKuM project to qualify asylum seekers and refugees as "Language and Culture Mediators" (LMC). The training period is 2.5 years, and following the German tradition of dual education system, it includes 1.5 years of theory and one year practice. The certified LMC assists representatives of the health and social sectors and their foreign patients by providing professional interpretation and socio-cultural mediation to avoid language problems and information deficits. This new profession combines specific skills and language knowledge, which means that asylum seekers not only get a qualification for a job that demands their specific background. They also contribute to their new society and help other asylum seekers. In Round 2 Diakonie Wuppertal is continuing these activities together with other partners in the 'TransKom' DP by further mainstreaming and providing training for this profile through the SpraKuM II subproject.

With 65 participants in Round 2, the number of asylum seekers participating in the project has more than doubled since Round 1 when 27 asylum seekers were certified. In Round 1 over 200 institutions were involved in the provision of vocational training posts and over 1,300 mediation cases were handled. The acute and widespread demand for this service confirmed the relevance and timeliness of the new profession being created. With the help of the strategic partners and placement-institutes, 70% of the first SpraKuM project participants entered the labour market, working in public or private organisations, 60% of them as LCMs.

Generally, in a context where asylum seekers only have very restricted access to employment, partnerships should focus on vocational areas where asylum seekers can "make a difference", so that they are not considered to be "competitors" in the local labour market. Therefore, several EQUAL projects set up training programmes that are reflective of the state of the national labour market. By encouraging asylum seekers to study for jobs that fill gaps in the labour market, the EQUAL programmes offer them the opportunity to train for a job that could quickly secure employment, provided that they successfully complete the training, find employers who are willing to recruit asylum seekers and obtain a work permit.

'Equality and Solidarity for Asylum Seekers – Guarantee for Employment and Freedom' (CY)

The Cypriot Partnership 'Equality and Solidarity for Asylum Seekers – Guarantee for Employment and Freedom' has devised 'integration pathways' for asylum seekers. The number of asylum applications has exponentially increased since Cyprus' entry in the EU, but neither language nor vocational training is available to them. The training delivered by the partnership consists of lessons promoting Greek language proficiency and Cypriot and European cultural orientation (phase 1); vocational training (phase 2), work experience through job placements of two to four months (phase 3). Due to a shortage of chef assistants, air conditioning and refrigeration assistant technicians; and secretarial assistants in the Cypriot labour force, the programme trains asylum seekers to fill these positions. Similarly, the creation of a new employment niche and related training, i.e. 'employment mediators', aims to secure asylum seekers' access to the labour market, while not threatening the position of local inhabitants.

Increasing public awareness and creating a positive image of asylum seekers also underpins the making of a video, which collects stories from asylum seekers about their journey and follows them at their work places. Louiza Papaloizou, the Project Manager of the Partnership, explains that: 'Asylum seeking is such a recent phenomenon here; many Cypriots do not even know what an asylum seeker is. It is important for us to show a face, a human being behind this concept and make people aware of why they are here – which is not to exploit the system.'

In sum, EQUAL has demonstrated that, in order to find employment for asylum seekers, projects and partners need to be flexible and willing to experiment with new approaches. Traineeships and voluntary work can provide that first and important step towards gainful employment for asylum seekers, and convince employers to offer a real work contract, where this is possible. New job profiles and the identification of labour market shortages help to focus efforts to get asylum seekers into employment and to avoid tension with the local or wider community.

LESSON 3. SKILLS AUDITS CAN HELP VULNERABLE GROUPS BACK INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

Matching skills with the demands of today's labour markets is a critical challenge for Europe. It is essential that the need for up-to-date skills is met, if Europe is to achieve its goal of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world³. But Europe is far from a heterogeneous world region, which makes it even more challenging to identify and manage where, and which sectors, skills are most needed. EQUAL has experimented with several interesting approaches to identify, recognise and validate in particular those skills that are not evidenced by certificates or other formal proof.

It is expected that the changing demographic situation in the EU will increasingly lead to skills and labour shortages, as well as competition for certain skills. Member States have already started devising special schemes to attract certain categories of workers from other countries and tried encouraging their citizens into certain types of education and training pathways which meets the demand of their national labour market. But it is equally important for Member States to realise that some of these much needed skills and resources are already available, but not yet recognised.

Vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, migrants, disabled and older people have many relevant non-formal skills. Others are unable to provide certificates or evidence of studies or employment and hence are unable to proof their skills to potential employers. Too often, these groups take part in education programmes or employment situations that do not make use of their real potential or which cannot accommodate their strong ambitions. Additionally, people from outside the EU may not know exactly what competences and abilities are considered important in the new country and unaware what specific qualifications are necessary to participate in certain education, training or professions. Some groups, such as older people, tend to shy away from new learning and employment opportunities, fearing new technologies or simply considering themselves to be 'too old' to make a drastic change in their professional lives.

The recognition and validation of the skills and qualifications of persons from such groups is crucial for effective socio-vocational integration and the maintenance of a competitive economy. Their acknowledgement presents, however, a true challenge in itself. Skills audits, or skills assessments, are an effective means of highlighting the skills available and identifying training requirements. Furthermore, skills audits can also help in tackling prejudices and raising public awareness of the actual potential and difficulties of certain groups, such as the problems asylum-seekers experience, but also the knowledge and experience that older people can bring to the workplace.

In response to the challenges associated with skills recognition, a number of EQUAL Partnerships have developed, piloted and applied new methods and tools to recognise, validate and assess the skills and abilities asylum-seekers have to offer. A range of positive achievements have been observed through the introduction of skills audits, including;

- Asylum seekers and migrants better understand their position within the labour market through personally constructed profiles.
- Most people find easier access to education and training resources or to the labour market which corresponds to their expectations and ambitions.
- Disadvantaged individuals are better matched with appropriate job opportunities.

³ DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (2000)
http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/knowledge_society/index_en.htm

- Public costs, for example welfare, are reduced when a participant has found work.

The main benefits of undertaking a skills audit are:

- They ensure that the attributes and competences of asylum seekers / employees (or unemployed) in search of (new) work are not lost to the Member State in which they currently live.
- They improve the self-esteem and self-reliance of the person undergoing the skills audit.
- They ensure that best use is made of available advice, education, training and opportunities for work.
- Skills audits help employers to recognise the potential and needs of asylum seekers / employees / unemployed.

The Copenhagen Declaration (November 2002) established the aim of developing a set of common principles at European level for the validation of non-formal and informal learning to ensure greater compatibility between approaches in different countries and at different levels, thereby adding value to work at local, regional and national level.

Lesson 3.1 Skills audits have an empowering effect on people

Acknowledging the skills that people have and actively involving them in their own skills audit can empower them to take up opportunities and participate in local communities. Indeed, applying skills audits as soon as possible to newcomers, such as asylum seekers, enables communities to benefit from vulnerable groups becoming fully self-supportive, much faster than may have done otherwise.

*Under the first round of EQUAL, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), one of the partners of the **EQUAL Partnership ASSET UK**, developed and implemented a skills audit instrument. The skills audits looked at the skills and qualifications of asylum seekers living in the East Midlands in order to determine the potential contribution they could make to their local community, and was undertaken with almost 1,000 asylum seekers. Results showed that a high number of asylum seekers have qualifications ranging from basic schooling to higher degrees, including vocational and professional qualifications. Many had employment experience before coming to the UK, and the majority of those surveyed spoke more than one language.*

Skills audits provide a valuable opportunity for people to have a concise record of their competences and identify any training needs. Validating the skills of persons with significant experience and tacit-knowledge is essential in today's economy. Through formal recognition of someone's skills and abilities, skills audits can help remove the pitfalls of inactivity and can integrate groups into the labour market.

*The **Investing in People EQUAL partnership** in Italy supported companies in a local Province through the provision of an innovative approach to the competences of their workforces. The approach was based on a Validation of Prior Learning system called 'Assessment of Existing Competences of Vulnerable Workers'. The system enabled the competences acquired by older and disabled workers to be validated. A portfolio of competences was then created that contained evidence (projects and videos for example) of educational and professional experience of the worker concerned. A list of competences the worker had acquired was also included in the portfolio. Finally, individual training programmes were developed to address any knowledge gaps identified during the audit process.*

An assessment also has clear benefits in terms of improving the participant's self-esteem. Many individuals who are without a job start questioning their value on the job market and in some

cases also more generally. Through self-reflection and other “auditing” activities together with a coach, the person who undertakes a skills audit gain insights into all valuable knowledge he or she possesses, which has been shown to empower the individual tremendously and boost their self-esteem.

Core elements to be included in skills audits

When EQUAL was in its first years of implementation, a small group of Development Partnerships focusing on asylum seekers came together to share their specific experiences and lessons from the skills audits they were all developing, in different Member States. Surprisingly, after a period of research and several exchanges, the group found that their approaches to skills audits were very similar. Together they identified [the most important factors](#) to ensure the success of a skills audit:

- Step 1: Informing potential candidates;
- Step 2: Selection of participants;
- Step 3: Initial interview;
- Step 4: Skills identification;
- Step 5: Skills validation;
- Step 6: Presentation of results;
- Step 7: Development of individualized programme or action plan;
- Step 8: Follow-up.

In step 1, potential candidates are informed about the possibility to undergo a skills audit. General information on how the audit will be undertaken is to be provided. It is also crucial, at this stage, to clearly communicate to the asylum seeker the benefits of undergoing a skills audit in terms of accessing suitable work and education. This will affect the individual motivation of an asylum seeker to participate in a skills audit, which is key factor to its eventual success. A thorough selection of participants to ensure that they are motivated and willing to take part in an often lengthy exercise takes place in step 2. No one is forced to participate.

Once participants have been identified, there is an initial interview (step 3) with the asylum seeker, sometimes referred to as the ‘intake interview’. The asylum seeker meets with the assessor or caseworker, who explains the assessment programme in greater detail and encourages to asylum seeker to remain actively involved throughout the entire process. It is important that a relationship of trust is established so that the participant feels at ease and understands the purpose of the assessment.

The intake interview is also the first opportunity to understand the asylum seeker’s ambitions, experiences and possible professional or vocational direction. The meeting also discusses their thoughts about their future in the host country and further investigates their motivation to participate in the skills audit process.

The next stage is to identify (step 4) ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ skills / qualifications / competencies / work experiences / language comprehension by using a variety of tools e.g. questionnaires, recording, interviews, digital portfolio and integrated skills audits. Next to the key lesson that several meetings with the participant are required in order to give the individual time to reflect on what has been said and add to what has previously been said, the working group identified a number of key lessons concerning the tools used.

Firstly, the skills audit questionnaires that have been developed specifically for asylum seekers are very detailed and intended to help the asylum seekers to talk not only about school, education, studies and jobs, but also about their family, the social network, hobbies, interests, and activities in the community. The latter may have resulted in relevant experiences and non-formal skills (e.g. gardening, sports trainer, childcare or domestic work), which can be drawn upon when looking at possible employment or education opportunities in the host country.

Secondly, because asylum seekers come from many backgrounds and can have a low to negligible comprehension of the host country language, language independence is an important feature of the tools used when working with asylum seekers. The skills audit questionnaires created for those with a low language comprehension often make use of pictures to illustrate how the asylum seeker feels about a certain subject or to describe their experiences within a specific area.

Thirdly, there is great value in the development of a methodology that incorporates skills auditing through continual feedback, reflection and self-evaluation that is carried out during vocational training and courses. By carrying out different 'awareness-raising' exercises through the teaching, asylum seekers are able to recognise the job-related skills that they possess, including the less obvious skills, which have been gained from different professional backgrounds. The combination of all these elements contributes to empowerment of each asylum seeker during the course.

The requirements for obtaining a certain degree or professional qualification vary between countries. Hence, the validation and "translation" of skills and qualifications into certificates valid in the host country (step 5) is usually necessary. How and when this validation takes place is dependent upon the national system. Undertaking the skills audit whilst an individual is still seeking asylum is, nevertheless, beneficial, since the process of official recognition once the application has been approved is speeded up this way. Usually it takes some time to locate and receive all the certificates, and the earlier this process is started, the better.

Skills audit outcomes (step 6) include a CV or written portfolio that can be presented to employers and education and training organizations. The asylum seeker has the ownership over the portfolio, which provides him/her with an up-to-date record that sets out his/her skills and potential contribution to the labour market. The portfolio is usually more detailed than a normal CV since it seeks to explain the background to any skills. In many countries of origin, CVs are not as commonly used as they are in the EU, which means that the benefits and purpose of creating a CV, including its contents, must be explained in detail to the asylum seeker.

The skills audit should always be looked at as a means forward and never constitute a goal in itself. Therefore, the next step in the skills audit process is to 'match' the skills and potential of the asylum seeker with realistic opportunities within the labour market and education system. An individualised programme/action plan should then be developed to set out the steps that must be taken to achieve a match between these skills and future options/opportunities (step 7). This could consist of an education plan, work-shadowing, volunteering or some other work-related plan depending on what the national system allows and what opportunities the skills audit has identified as being most appropriate. Some partnerships, such as the DP Want2Work, have developed a skills audit database as a follow-up tool to the asylum seekers' skills audits. This database is used for matching possible employers with the asylum seekers in order to find work or internship places.

The evaluation of the cost effectiveness of undertaking skills audits is made in the follow-up (step 8). It is essential to systematically follow up any results from the skills audits process. Direct and indirect benefits should be monitored in addition to any costs and drawbacks. Case studies can be a useful tool.

Lesson 3.2 Skills audits processes should be accompanied by mediation between vulnerable groups and employers, to ensure a smooth transition into employment

Establishing networks and partnerships with employers and employer organisations is critical to a successful skills audit process, as this should ultimately lead to individuals finding appropriate and interesting employment. EQUAL projects have effectively demonstrated the importance of successful partnerships in providing opportunities to asylum-seekers and supporting their integration.

*The **Becoming Visible partnership in Finland** supported asylum-seekers in finding a job by contacting employers to encourage them to participate in study visits and offer practical work placements. One set of work placements led to permanent employment for some participants. The EQUAL partnership also organised a jobs fair where asylum-seekers were able to meet employers and learn about job opportunities. Additionally, employers were able to meet and interview potential new employees.*

Lesson 3.3 Skills audits also help to support self-employment and business creation

The recognition and validation of skills can also help to support self-employment and business creation. Removing obstacles to business creation is one of the top priorities of EU and many national policies. Supporting entrepreneurship among vulnerable groups is an effective means of achieving this goal. Moreover, it is a positive way of using the skills that persons from these groups have to offer.

*The partnership **WANT2WORK in Denmark** is an excellent example of how the skills auditing process can be used to create new businesses. This project offered a 'start your own business course' to asylum-seekers, which took into account of participants' strengths and interests which resulted from their individual skills assessments. The course had been developed by entrepreneurs using their own experiences. The direct involvement of professionals brought many benefits, such as a 'hands-on' approach, access to valuable networks for sourcing work placements and classes taught by inspiring guest teachers. Participants on such courses managed to find internships with employers in their chosen sector or business area, which strongly increased their self-esteem and work experience.*

In conclusion, skills audits are instrumental in identifying and recognising the skills and experiences of vulnerable groups and in ensuring their effective integration into the labour market. Raising awareness of the experiences of different groups among employers and the wider society will further promote acceptance of vulnerable groups and increase social cohesion. If employers and society alike can recognise the skills that all citizens have to offer, then Europe can indeed achieve its goal of the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

ANNEX A - POLICY BACKGROUND

POLICIES RELATED TO EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

The following developments in Employment and Social Policy were of relevance to the EQUAL initiative.

The new [Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs](#), and in particular the employment guidelines, are placing emphasis on increasing the competitiveness of the EU and dealing with the demographic evolution by making more effective use of the migrant work force. Third-country nationals can make an important contribution to satisfying current and future labour market needs and therefore ensure economic stability and growth.

The revamped [Social Agenda](#), published at the beginning of 2005, draws attention to Europe's need for a greater number of workers in order to attain the Lisbon growth and jobs objectives. It calls for a process of consultation as to how the question of economic migration should be tackled in this regard. The Green Paper on [Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations](#) looks at the extent to which migration can make a contribution to mitigate the effects of the falling population in Europe.

The [Social Inclusion Process](#), an important EU policy instrument part of the Social Agenda, highlights in its [2007 implementation report](#) the adoption of a more holistic approach to the integration of migrants and the social inclusion of ethnic minorities in several Member States, by addressing educational disadvantages, fighting discrimination and promoting participation in civic life more broadly. The report considers that there is still a sizeable 'hard core' of people with little prospect of finding a job who, for that reason, remain at high risk of falling into poverty and social exclusion. There would be scope in drawing attention to the potential and the needs of asylum seekers, arguing for their insertion in the Social Inclusion Process.

The EQUAL Community Initiative has been funded by the [European Social Fund](#) (ESF). This fund is one of the Structural Funds of the European Union (EU) created to reduce differences in prosperity and living standards across the EU Member States and regions. The Structural Funds therefore promote both economic and social cohesion. The specific role of the ESF is to promote employment in the EU. The fund helps Member States to make Europe's work force and enterprises better equipped to face new, global challenges such as demographic changes and an ageing population.

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS RELATED TO EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

[Regulation 1081/2006](#) for the ESF 2007-2013 says (whereas): "New lessons have been learnt from the Community Initiative EQUAL, especially in respect of the combination of local, regional, national and European action. These lessons should be integrated into ESF support. Particular attention should be paid to the participation of target groups, the integration of migrants, including those seeking asylum, the identification of policy issues and their subsequent mainstreaming, innovation and experimentation techniques, methodologies for transnational cooperation, outreach to groups marginalised in relation to the labour market, the impact of social issues on the internal market, and access to and management of projects taken on by non-governmental organisations."

Over the period 2007 – 2013 around €75 billion euro will be distributed by ESF to the EU Member States to achieve its goals. Each Member State has put in place one or more Operational Programmes which set out the specific national objectives and actions proposed.

Around eight Member States have specifically included asylum seekers in their Operational Programmes 2007 – 2013 and more than 10 are making references to asylum seekers. This means that funds have been set aside for the development of projects to support this highly disadvantaged group to access employment and vocational education and training. In several other countries, there is a possibility that asylum seekers can be included in ESF programmes, even though they are not specifically mentioned.

POLICIES RELATED TO ASYLUM

The development for an efficient and effective [Common European Asylum System](#) (CEAS) became an EU priority due to a range of factors such as public expectations, impending enlargement and the situation in Bosnia and Kosovo. The number of asylum seekers and refugees significantly increased from the mid-eighties onwards, peaking in 1992, before slowly declining and then steadily rising again in 1996. Also, the “burden” of asylum seekers did not fall equally between Member States, who had less national control over arrivals on their territories following the European principle of free movement and the implementation of the Schengen Agreement. Moreover, asylum seekers and refugees were subject to different procedures, rights and benefits across the EU, and these disparate national rules and systems were considered to be one of the reasons for secondary movements or ‘asylum shopping’.

The strong political rationale for a CEAS was reflected in the 1999 Treaty of Amsterdam, which set out an ambitious programme for the establishment of an area of freedom, security and justice. It was also captured in the 1999 Tampere Conclusions, which outlined the policy guidelines and practical objectives to be reached within a five-year timeframe in four policy areas under the area of freedom, security and justice, i.e. a common EU asylum and immigration policy, a genuine European area of justice, a union-wide fight against crime and stronger external action. The Tampere European Council sent out a strong political message which affirmed the importance of the area of freedom, security and justice and put it at the top of the political agenda. The Tampere Conclusions were welcomed by civil society groups and other stakeholders who saw them to be a firm commitment to a more harmonised and humanitarian approach ensuring common standards and safeguards across the EU.

The 1999 Tampere European Council put forward the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) based on a full and inclusive application of the 1951 UN Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees. The Tampere conclusions and the Treaty of Amsterdam set a five-year timeframe for work on the adoption of minimum standards and measures on EU asylum policy.⁴ The Council succeeded in realising this ambitious target, adopting legislative measures on:

- **The member state responsible for examining an asylum claim** (adopted in February 2003).⁵ Referred to as the Dublin II regulation, this instrument updates and improves the 1990 Dublin Convention which lays down criteria for deciding which member state is responsible for handling which asylum application. The aim is to prevent multiple demands or situations where no country accepts responsibility for the examination of an asylum claim.
- **Minimum standards on the reception of asylum seekers** (adopted in January 2003).⁶ The Reception Directive ensures that host countries guarantee a dignified standard of living for asylum seekers and especially those with special needs, such as unaccompanied minors, victims of torture and pregnant women. Two Articles refer to access to the labour market and vocational training for asylum seekers. Article 11 establishes that *Asylum seekers have the right to access the Labour Market at the latest one year after they lodged their asylum application*. However, Member States may give priority to EU citizens and nationals of the EEA and legally resident third country nationals for ‘national labour market reasons’. Article 12 refers to vocational training, and establishes that *Member States can allow asylum seekers to participate in vocational training whether they have access to the Labour Market or not* (but only if the vocational training is not linked to an employment contract). In relation to capacity building, Article 24 stipulates that *Member States shall take appropriate measures to ensure that*

4 For more info, see DG JLS, ‘The European Union Policy towards a Common European Asylum System’, http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/fsj/asylum/fsj_asylum_intro_en.htm

5 Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003 of 18 February 2003 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32003R0343:EN:NOT>

6 Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers : <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32003L0009:EN:NOT>

authorities and other organisations implementing this Directive have received the necessary basic training with respect to the needs of both male and female applicants.

- **Minimum standards on the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection** (adopted in April 2004).⁷ The Qualification Directive puts forward a set of criteria for qualifying either for refugee or subsidiary protection status and sets out which rights are attached to each status. In particular, the Directive aims to introduce a harmonised regime for subsidiary protection in the EU for those persons who fall outside the scope of the Geneva Convention, but who nevertheless still need international protection, such as victims of generalised violence or civil war.
- **Minimum standards on procedures for granting or withdrawing refugee status** (adopted in December 2005).⁸ This Directive ensures that throughout the EU, all procedures, in the first instance, are subject to the same minimum standards. Both accelerated and regular procedures provide the same safeguards for applicants – for example, the right to be invited to a personal interview – as well as the basic principles and guarantees relating to interpretation and access to legal aid. The Directive also obliges all Member States to ensure an ‘effective remedy before a court or tribunal’ and such judicial scrutiny goes well beyond the standards mentioned above.
- **Minimum standards for granting temporary protection** (adopted in July 2001). This Directive sets up a temporary protection system for situations of a mass influx of people fleeing their homes as a result of war situations, for example. This allows displaced persons to settle, work and receive social benefits for a limited time in a host country.

Another objective of the CEAS was to ensure that Member States shared the responsibility of receiving refugees and displaced persons. The establishment of the **European Refugee Fund (ERF)** was one of the first asylum-policy measures adopted on the basis of the Amsterdam Treaty.⁹ It was set up to support and encourage the efforts of EU Member States in receiving asylum seekers and displaced persons by **making funds (€216 million) available for refugee reception and in this way assisting them with the costs**. Five percent of the ERF resources were set aside for Community Actions, which comprised joint interventions of a transnational character. After a smaller-scale pilot phase of three years, the first ERF was launched in 2000 and finished at the end of 2004. Council Decision 2004/904/EC¹⁰ launched the second stage of the ERF covering the period 2005-2010¹¹. From 2008 onwards, the Fund forms an integral part of the Framework Programme for Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows, which also encompasses the European Return Fund, the External Borders Fund and the Integration Fund.

EQUAL has provided Member States with an additional route for claiming resources to share their responsibility for receiving asylum seekers.

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS RELATED TO ASYLUM

The **CEAS** was intended to be built in two phases. The first phase, comprising the four main legal instruments described in the above (the Dublin Regulation, the Reception Conditions Directive, the Qualification Directive and the Asylum Procedures Directive) has been completed in June 2007. According to the Hague Programme, the **second phase** instrument should be adopted by the end of 2010.

7 Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32004L0083:EN:HTML>

8 Council Directive 2005/85/EC of 1 December 2005 on minimum standards on procedures in Member States for granting and withdrawing refugee status: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2005:326:0013:01:EN:HTML>

9 Council Decision 2000/596/EC. Council Decision of 28 September 2000 establishing a European Refugee Fund.

10 Council Decision of 2 December 2004 establishing the European refugee Fund for the period 2005-2010.

11 The final evaluation of the ERF I is available in the Commission Staff Working Document SEC(2006) 1636 at: http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/funding/refugee/doc/evaluation_2006/dg_eval_European_dec06_en.pdf

In June 2007, the European Commission presented a **Green Paper on the future of the CEAS**¹², launching therefore a debate on the architecture of the CEAS. The goal of this Green Paper's consultation was to gather the views and suggestions of all the relevant stakeholders in order to contribute to the shaping of the CEAS. The Green Paper presents comprehensively a broad range of issues that will have to be addressed in the second phase. In particular, it identifies four main areas where further action is necessary and these areas form its four main chapters, i.e. Legislative instruments; Implementation- Accompanying measures; Solidarity and burden-sharing and the External dimension of asylum.

The result of this debate informed the preparation of the [Policy Plan on Asylum](#) policy, adopted by the Commission in June 2008. This, in turn, forms the roadmap for Commission work towards the achievement of the CEAS. The Policy Plan proposes to improve definition at EU of standards for protection, in order to achieve the ambitious objectives set out in the Hague Programme, by amending the existing legal instruments. At the same time, it acknowledges that legal convergence must be complemented by adequate practical cooperation mechanisms (exchange of information and best practices, common trainings, etc.) if convergence in asylum decisions, and therefore equality of protection across the EU, is to be reached. A European Support Office on Asylum will be established in order to coordinate practical cooperation activities. The Policy Plan also sets out a number of tools to foster solidarity vis-à-vis those Member States confronted with strong pressures on their asylum systems. Finally, it presents ideas for supporting third countries which host high numbers of refugees, by inter alia the establishment of an EU-wide resettlement scheme and the expansion of the existing Regional Protection Programmes. The Policy Plan does not contain **precise proposals** (e.g. of the second stage instruments), which will be presented between this year and 2010.

¹² Green Paper on the future Common European Asylum System, Commission of the European Communities, Brussels, 6.06.2007, COM 2007 (201) Final, http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/news/intro/doc/com_2007_301_en.pdf