

EQUAL LESSONS IN RURAL AND URBAN RESTRUCTURING

Restructuring by EQUAL @ Open Days

Hosted by the Committee of the Regions and the European Commission's Regional Policy Directorate General (DG), the 5th *OPEN DAYS-European Week of Regions and Cities* featured solutions in proactive restructuring of rural and urban regions developed by EQUAL projects. This good practice was presented in a workshop on 9 October 2007 entitled "*Regional strategies for innovative and social inclusive restructuring*", one of the 15 working sessions in the Open Days organised by the EQUAL Unit of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. The workshop, chaired by Mr. Joost van Iersel, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee, featured presentations by representatives of two EQUAL projects - *MünchenKompetent* and *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions*. These examples were well suited and highly relevant for the regions and cities represented in the OPEN DAYS as they presented grass-roots level practice and solutions to restructuring both in rural and urban European regions. The presentations of projects were preceded by a general introduction on how the projects financed by the EQUAL programme tackle the issue of restructuring and what good practice examples as well as lessons EQUAL can provide for the people allocating and receiving financing from European Social Fund (ESF) in the future.

LINKING EQUAL AND RESTRUCTURING

The first presentation in the Restructuring Workshop was given by Ms. Helen Tubb, Senior Consultant at GHK Consulting Ltd. (GHK), a company which for the last five years has assisted the EQUAL Unit with European-level dissemination of EQUAL good practice examples and results. Ms. Tubb provided a short overview of the EQUAL programme, how it related to the theme of restructuring and illustrated the "EQUAL approach to restructuring" in Europe's regions with a number of examples from projects supported by this Initiative.

During 2005 and 2006, GHK research revealed that 813 EQUAL projects were working or had worked on various aspects of the restructuring theme. After analysis of a project sample, GHK produced a number of documents presenting the measures, approaches and good practice developed by EQUAL projects to tackle the issue of restructuring. Publications "*EQUAL: Emerging lessons and insights on Restructuring*" and "*Restructuring: curse or remedy?*" invited readers to look at the restructuring as a natural phenomenon, which needs to be addressed proactively in order for it to be seen in a positive light. The publication "*EQUAL and ESF Article 6: innovative and socially responsible restructuring*" compiled EQUAL solutions to restructuring issues and was presented at the 3rd 'Restructuring Forum', which took place in Brussels in December 2006. And finally the 'Policy Brief' entitled "*Human Capital and Restructuring: a focus on SME investment*" was presented during the Open Days workshop on Restructuring itself, thereby bringing to the participants' attention a few good practices and lessons EQUAL projects may offer in the restructuring process.

The rest of the time, the Restructuring Workshop was devoted to the presentations of two EQUAL projects – the first addressing the restructuring of a rural area in Czech Republic and the second, the adaptation and development of Munich, the capital of the German Free State of Bavaria. These examples offered an interesting mix of perspectives to restructuring in the European regions as one concentrated on the promotion of lifelong learning (LLL) as means to revitalise a predominantly rural area and other on holistic and proactive strategies to preserve and improve the competitiveness of a large city, tackling among other the needs and potential of marginalised groups. The presentations were followed by a question-and-answer session.

FACILITATION OF LIFELONG EDUCATION IN RURAL CONDITIONS

The project *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* operates in the North-East Liberec Region of Czech Republic, more specifically in the District of Semily. The population of the region is predominantly rural. However, after the decline of agriculture and textile industries

the area is becoming increasingly popular for mountain tourism. Against this backdrop, the Czech project is working with people living in the villages of the Semily District in order to help them with adaptation to these recent structural, technological and economic changes.

As explained by the project representatives Mr. Jan Rychlík (Labour Office in Semily) and Ms. Kateřina Baladová (association "Bridge to Education"), *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* focuses on facilitating education for inhabitants of remote rural locations with limited public transport services and limited opportunities for LLL. The large majority of the people benefiting from these activities are women. The project offers the opportunity to attend courses in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), foreign languages, business management basics and many other courses currently in demand in the regional labour market, such as welding or logging. All training is free of charge and is delivered in close proximity to the beneficiaries. Apart from this classical face-to-face education, the project also offers possibilities of distance learning.

During the presentation, Mr. Rychlík emphasised that it is important to bring together all the relevant partners and to ensure their commitment. *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* project unites 20 partner organisations of different types (public, private and NGOs), cooperating with separate competencies and activities, but shared responsibility for the success of the partnership. Many of these have had a previous experience of cooperation with each other on a bilateral basis. However, the project has enabled them to cooperate multilaterally, creating effective synergies, new stimuli and experience that would not have been possible had the partners worked in isolation. This unique partnership made it possible to test new ways of making learning an important, integral and accessible part of rural life.

All the activities of the partnership are focused on the specific needs of the target groups, identified through a survey conducted in ten selected villages in the Semily district during the initial phases of the project. This research identified the cost, accessibility and manageability of further learning as the main barriers to the development of the region's population. Foreign languages, ICT, economic and technical skills were highlighted as most important in terms of the needs of both the target groups and the regional labour market, in order to foster the desired socio-economic change. The training system, based on the needs of beneficiaries and the various interests of the project partners, is constantly being improved. Ms. Baladová notes: "*As the project life cycle is centred on the target group – the villagers – it is really essential to collect feedback from the beneficiaries and the partners also during the implementation phase and to adjust the project accordingly.*"

The training system developed by the Czech project is based on a modular format, comprising short, 90-minute lessons that take place once a week over several months. Courses focusing on technical skills, of which practical training is an integral part, comprise longer, usually 8-hour sessions at weekends. This training offer is characterised by flexibility – the courses offered are outside working hours and during the weekends and the reconciliation of learning with other work or family commitments due to the provision of other support services such as childcare. The knowledge and skills gained through the training are certified and the participants are provided with the opportunity to influence the format, organisation and the content of the courses.

Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions project also has a [transnational](#) dimension, a requirement for all undertakings financed by EQUAL. In fact the project is involved in two transnational partnerships, which has enabled its partners to see how similar problems are addressed in other EU Member States, enabling the comparison of measures and enriching the project through exchange of good practice.

The project coordinators of *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* have received great feedback both from the participating partner organisations and the training participants about the value of the courses. The training system model is now being presented and tested in other rural regions in the Czech Republic. The project partners also seek ways to transfer the practice to other EU countries, especially the "new" Member States through new transnational partnerships.

MÜNCHENKOMPETENT – DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGION'S COMPETENCES

As explained by Maria Rauch ([Equalmünchen GmbH](#)) and Michaela Pichlbauer ([SIM](#)), the *MünchenKompetent* project on the other hand is an instrument of anticipation and change in Munich – the third biggest city in Germany. *MünchenKompetent* has the total budget of 4.5 million Euros, a considerable part of which is provided by the city of Munich and the project

partners, signalling not only the practical commitment but also the financial engagement of the actors involved in the project.

The city region is characterised by relatively good growth and low unemployment rates (5-6%), as well as a mix of traditional and new industries - the so called "Munich mix". However, there are still around 70,000 unemployed in the city and the positive development of high-technology enterprise clusters in the region unfortunately also implies that the people with lower skills are ever more excluded. The economic landscape of the city is also dominated by big companies, resulting in the situation of SMEs being neglected. Furthermore, the decline in traditional industries and some negative factors of globalisation, such as delocalisation of the production processes have the hardest hit on the most vulnerable and excluded groups, resulting in ever increasing social inequalities.

The "*MünchenKompetent*" project intends to alleviate the negative consequences of these developments by creating a number of strategic projects, including anticipation and re-integration programmes, adapted to the new labour market reality and promoting new employment policies, which need to be flexible and linked to the European Employment Strategy on the national, regional and local levels. The *MünchenKompetent* project responds to the Munich labour market analysis described above by focussing on the encouragement of new businesses start-ups, promotion of LLL and organisational, as well as personnel development in companies.

The promotion of entrepreneurship and support for new businesses are efficient tools to create jobs. However, self-employment continues to be a male domain in Bavaria – 14.8% of all gainfully employed men are self-employed, whereas this percentage is only at around 7% for women. In order to raise the proportion of women amongst the self-employed, *MünchenKompetent* advocates for the removal of barriers for business start-ups and offering customised coaching, in particular for women in order to increase their potential to set up new businesses. *MünchenKompetent* is also working on an applicable concept for LLL designed to encourage the readiness of all social groups to undergo training as early and constantly as possible. This strategy has a particular focus on the disadvantaged groups in the Munich labour market, such as the (long-term) unemployed, migrants, young and elderly people. It also has to focus on the requirements of Munich's SMEs, who could potentially offer employment to a proportion of these people. The project is also working on a cooperation model between schools, companies and young people. It has created a system, facilitated by the City of Munich, which puts the schools in contact with the companies, informing the first about the latter's recruitment needs. This part of the project is also specifically focused on assisting young people, in particular those with bad marks, in their way to employment.

Finally, *MünchenKompetent* reinforced the competitiveness of the local SMEs by promoting new forms of strategic alliances and network cooperation. The individual SMEs as a rule operate as individual players in the market, which places them in an environment of fierce competition against large corporations and high market risks. SMEs that team up in networks benefit from the improved transfer of information, experience and synergies, while the City gains from a more competitive and diverse market. The *Organisational development in companies* – a sub-project within *MünchenKompetent* – developed several networks between SMEs and tested whether they are suitable as a local labour market instrument. One of these networks united small organic food shops. The project was carried out in close cooperation with the Health and Environment department of the City of Munich within the framework of the "BioStadt München" ("Organic Munich") initiative. This network not only anticipated the current changes in the economic environment, but also created common strategies for dealing with these changes (e.g. building common identity (logo), reinforcing cooperation and the relative market weight). This *MünchenKompetent* sub-project gave the small shops a possibility to grow and to take an active part in the restructuring of a whole organic food sector. It secured and reinforced the SME position in this market niche and the employment related to it - the impetus that will have positive effects well beyond the project life of *MünchenKompetent*.

CONCLUSIONS THROUGH RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the apparent differences between the projects presented in the Open Days 'Restructuring Workshop', the presentations converge in surprisingly similar recommendations - among these was the idea of the crucial role that the networks and strategic choice of partners play in the successful process of restructuring in a region. The presenters were united on the

idea that it is crucial to involve and empower the project beneficiaries and partners by encouraging their active participation and responsibility from the very outset of the project.

Other preconditions for successful restructuring were pre-developed culture of networking, involvement of social partners, and mainstreaming – working with project partners and policy makers to establish a sustainable institutional framework for the project activities and ideas to continue also after the project comes to an end.

Finally, the representatives of both projects presented in the workshop emphasised that the people who benefited from the EQUAL restructuring-related activities confessed having a better understanding of the EU, its policies and ideas, as they had personally experience how these can be useful in practice. This way EQUAL programme has helped to spread the good word about the Union in its regions. To conclude the Open Days workshop on restructuring, Mr. van Iersel noted: *"Today's workshops presented both solutions for restructuring in urban and rural areas. These activities have brought the flag of the European Union to its regions."*