

## BUILDING ON DIVERSITY - COLOURFUL WORKSHOP

**"Racism is against trade unionism. Racism destroys solidarity between our members and solidarity is the unique strength of trade unions, especially when it comes to our place and role in social consultations with the Government." These are the concerns of the three Belgian trade unions that are partners in one of the very few EQUAL projects, which are directly promoted and sponsored by the social partners.**

### AIMS AND BACKGROUND OF THE DP

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A number of studies undertaken during the late 1990s had shown both the nature and the extent of racial discrimination that existed within the labour market in the Flemish Community of Belgium. Also, despite the introduction by the government of a plan of positive action that provided grants to employers who hired ethnic minority or migrant workers, the majority of firms or agencies that took advantage of the subsidies were those that already had a tradition of employing people from these target groups.

The Flemish trade unions had been concerned about this situation and over the last 10 years they mounted a number of campaigns, sometimes in cooperation with each other. Then in June 2001, the Flemish Ministry of Employment and Tourism and the three unions signed a protocol geared to promoting non-discrimination and diversity in the workplace. The development of this project took place within the framework of this protocol, as the trade unions saw EQUAL as a way of deepening and disseminating their experiences in this area and of equipping their union delegates and shop stewards with practical tools so that they could influence the employment policies of the companies and institutions in which they worked.

#### The Partners

Thus, the Colourful Workshop Development Partnership (DP) has these three trade unions as its main national partners: ABVV (the Socialist trade union); ACV (the Christian trade union); and ACLVB (the Liberal trade union). All of these trade unions are represented within the DP by organisations that they have established with the status of VZW, which is an abbreviation for "vereniging zonder winst oogmerk" or in other words a non-profit making organisation.

In the case of ABVV these organisations are:

- vzw Welkom with its experience of working with ethnic minorities is the promoter of the EQUAL project and employs both the project co-ordinator and the project manager;
- vzw Instituut voor Vakbondsvorming or (IVV) is involved with the training of union delegates and shop stewards;
- vzw De Brug maintains the web site on behalf of the project

The social or non-profit organisations related to ACV that are also involved in this DP are:

- ACV-Informatief that provides training and guidance to ethnic minorities and migrants;
- Vlaams Centrum voor Werknemersvorming, which is an educational/training organisation for union delegates and members of ACV;

ACLVB's organisations that are members of the DP are:

- vzw Keerpunt, which is a training organisation;
- vzw Werknemerswelzijn that also has experience in training of union delegates;

However, within the project it is usual to refer to ABVV, ACV or ACLVB and not the other seven non-profit organisations. These organisations are part of each union's overall contribution to the project and they have been brought on board to work out the different types of training that the project will offer to union delegates and shop stewards from the chosen "good-practice" companies in the five Flemish provinces of West-Vlaanderen, Oost-Vlaanderen, Antwerpen, Limburg and Vlaams Brabant.

## **ACTIVITIES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

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As indicated above, the project wants to produce practical tools for use by their delegates and shop stewards. It has now been agreed that the following instruments will be made available:

- A guide to good practices;
- A handbook on promoting non-discrimination and diversity;
- A concept for office or factory floor training in intercultural communication

### **Research and Training**

In order to develop these products and to identify examples of good practice, each trade union carried out research in a minimum of five pilot companies on how both the management and the employees deal with foreign colleagues in the workplace. The aim was to identify the factors that make it difficult or make it easier to work together in a multi-cultural setting. In this research, every union tried to determine how each company's Human Resource Management was organised, particularly in relation to the recruitment of new employees and the selection criteria that were used. They also attempted to discover what the trade unions had accomplished in the struggle against racism and discrimination within these companies. In addition to their geographical spread across the five Flemish provinces, the companies that were chosen are also spread over different sectors like the non-profit sector, the metal sector, the food sector and the transport sector.

Every partner trade union organises training sessions in each of the five companies that it chose. Several topics are discussed in these sessions that are based on the field research. The project thinks that it is very important to work with 'factual situations' taken from day to day reality of working within the company, rather than talking about complex theoretical issues concerning multiculturalism. The DP also feels that the most important thing is "to learn how to deal with a changing environment and to deal with things and people that are different from what we are used to." It also believes that while it maybe useful to explain the negative effects of racism and discrimination in general terms, "it is more urgent to give knowledge and understanding to union representatives and employees so that they are able to communicate and work together without racism and discrimination and to change their behaviour in a positive way".

These training sessions just began at the end of 2003 and ACV and ABVV have planned six days of training, while ACLVB plans to organise four days of training for shop stewards in the companies. Each union has its own approach to this training but despite the differences, all are committed to ensuring that these new skills and understanding should reach the office or the factory floor and thus help to create more positive working environments.

### **A Common Commitment**

This common commitment is an extremely interesting aspect of this project. While there had been some previous examples of the three unions working together, none of these involved the same high level of continuing cooperation. The concept of the Development Partnership and the resources that were available in EQUAL certainly helped to establish this degree of cooperation to which all three unions are making a major commitment in terms of time and resources. The DP also sees "this agreement and cooperation as a very innovative concept because every union has many members. This is a very interesting aspect for the further dissemination of our three products because the 'delivering market' has been increased by the cooperation." The project also hopes that with all three unions working together, it may be more possible to influence or

persuade the Flemish and the Federal Governments to sustain the momentum and the practices that it has created.

The DP was late getting started mainly due to problems that were not within its control. Its Action 2 phase only commenced in January and the project coordinator only started working on 1 July 2003. Thus, the project hopes that the Flemish Authorities will agree to an extension of its operational period. Nevertheless, it believes that its products will be ready on time with the Guide to Good Practices appearing in May 2004, to be followed by the Handbook in September 2004. The last product, which is the Concept for Training in Intercultural Communication, is scheduled for the end of the year.

## **TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION**

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Colourful Workshop is involved in a transnational partnership with a DP in the Netherlands called [Towards a Workforce without Discrimination](#). It had originally been intended that this partnership would produce a manual for employees and union activists but with the delays in getting the joint activities up and running, it might not now be possible to create such a common product before the beginning of 2005..

## **INVOLVEMENT IN ETG1**

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The DP is not directly involved with any of the Working Groups of ETG1. However, there are many aspects of its activities that are relevant to WG2: The Role of Trade Unions, and some may also be of interest to WG5: Ethnic Minorities and Migrants.

### **DP information**

Member State: Belgium

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Link to DP website : <http://www.wekom.be>

Link to [EQUAL database description](#)