

## PARTNERS IN FIGHTING RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

### SMEs JOIN AN EQUAL DP TO PROMOTE FAIR RECRUITMENT PRACTICES IN THE CHAMPAGNE ARDENNE REGION

Almost everywhere in the European Union, immigrants face persistent and much higher barriers to employment than indigenous workers. In France, unemployment amongst the foreign population is twice as high as the national average, but many French nationals of foreign origin, especially if they are young, experience similar problems in finding a job. *Compétences et Différences*, a regional EQUAL Development Partnership in the North of France, has set out to counteract ethnically biased prejudices and those recruitment practices that do not provide equal opportunities in immigrants' access to work. It is time helping companies and trade unions to incorporate gender equality into all their operations.

### RECOGNISING THE SCOPE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET - THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Reliable data on the number and origin of immigrants in France is extremely difficult to identify. This is mainly because the population census does not differentiate citizens with French nationality by the ethnic or national origin of their parents, as there is a concern to protect individuals against possible risks of discriminatory uses of such data. Official statistics only show that about 3.35 million residents or 5.5% of the total population hold a non-French passport and of these, more than one third have emigrated from the Maghreb region. However, most experts argue that, in terms of social and policy concerns, the total size of the immigrant population is much larger, and should also include citizens, who were born abroad but subsequently acquired French nationality, and their second or third generation descendants.



If this is the case, well-founded estimates suggest that 25% of all residents in France have an immigrant background.

The large majority of immigrants have French nationality and share equal rights with the indigenous population. However, this legal equality does not really exist in practice. Many immigrants, both French citizens and foreigners, experience particular problems in the labour market that are related to their racial or ethnic origins. Especially amongst qualified young people with an immigrant background, the rate of unemployment is three times that of the national average. Quantitative evidence that might be used to combat unequal treatment based on racial prejudices is hard to trace because, paradoxically, this would require access to precisely the type of data on ethnic origin that is not compiled in official statistics.

Since 1998, when the Ministry of Employment drew up an action plan to fight discrimination, policy initiatives in this field have multiplied, but yawning gaps have persisted between these policy intentions and discriminatory employment practices at the level of individual enterprises. Against this background, France has launched a substantial number of Development Partnerships (DPs) during both EQUAL Round 1 and Round 2 to tackle these gaps, under the thematic priority of *Combating Racism and Xenophobia in relation to the labour market* (EQUAL Theme B). About one fourth of all DPs operating under this thematic priority has been selected in France, far more than in any other Member State.

This importance attached to fighting discrimination against immigrants and ethnic minorities is very much in line with the European Employment Guidelines ([2005/600/EC](#)) which place a strong emphasis on reducing employment gaps between third-country nationals and EU citizens. In its Recommendation ([2004/741/EC](#)) on the implementation of Member States' employment policies, the Council stresses, in one of its specific recommendations to France, the need to "build

effective pathways to work and training for unemployed young people and for immigrants" in order to attract more people to the labour market and to make work a real option for all.

## **A REGIONAL DP THAT BETS ON A SIMPLE EQUATION: VALUING INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCE + PRACTICING UNBIASED RECRUITMENT = EQUAL ACCESS TO WORK + SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS**

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Launched in autumn 2005, the *Compétences & Différences* Development Partnership in the Champagne Ardenne Region has set out to satisfy the above equation. Karim Bekdache of AEFTI Marne, the DP's Managing Organisation which has its headquarters in Reims, argues that *"the particularly high level of unemployment amongst immigrants in our region is closely linked to the issue of racial discrimination rather than to a lack of jobs"*.



Jean-Louis Schneiter, the Mayor of the City of Reims, expresses a very similar view by pointing to the paradox that *"on the one side we hear employers' complaints about their difficulties of finding young people who are able to fill the available job-vacancies, and on the other side we have a large number of job seekers in our region. This is an absurd situation and we must do something about it. We must understand, and this should concern not only employers but also a number of their employees, that those who do not necessarily have the*

*same culture, religion or colour of skin are citizens like all the others and can contribute to what is required for the development of our country"*.

The *Compétences & Différences* DP provides a platform for a new approach linking the interests and needs of **two target groups: immigrant job seekers or trainees, and employers who are searching for competent workers**. The largest potential for employment and economic development in the region resides with the craft industry. This sector encompasses a wide range of different trades and has an increasingly unsatisfied demand for a diversity of professional skills at different levels of qualification. The craft sector is also the most important provider of apprenticeship training which offers promising gateways to permanent employment. However, current recruitment practices often tend to ignore applications from immigrants. *"Adapting the vocational preparation and training of immigrant job seekers to the needs of enterprises is not enough to overcome this barrier. We must also find effective ways of convincing employers of the advantages that can be gained from a more diverse workforce and of offering them assistance and practical tools to promote methods of recruitment that eliminate discrimination,"* explains Karim Bekdache in describing the challenge that the DP is facing.

A key concern in the DP's approach to promoting unbiased recruitment practices is ensuring that job applications are assessed by employers solely on the basis of the individual competences of the candidates. However, job applications usually provide implicit information about the ethnic origin of the jobseekers that can be inferred from their names, addresses or photographs and such information can provoke reservations on the part of the employer. Therefore, *Compétences & Différences* is unconditionally committed to supporting a process of recruitment in which the pre-selection of candidates takes place on the basis of job applications that are made "anonymous".

## **A PARTNERSHIP BASED ON AN UNUSUAL ALLIANCE OF KEY OPERATORS**

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*Compétences & Différences* has forged a strong alliance between three key regional actors that represent the interests of the two target groups that are mentioned above:

- [AEFTI Marne](#) which is one of nine regional branches of the Association pour l'Enseignement et la Formation des Travailleurs Immigrés (Association for the Education and Training of Immigrant Workers). Founded in 1992 on the initiative of a group of Trade Union representatives, AEFTI Marne is a key actor in the fight against discrimination and has become a reference point for the equal treatment of immigrants in the Champagne Ardenne Region. AEFTI Marne offers a range of pre-vocational training programmes and support services for about 1300 individuals each year who are facing particular difficulties in the labour market or in entering training that would lead them to a recognised qualification;

- The UPA Champagne Ardenne, the regional Union of the craft industry, which represents the interests of 16.000 SMEs or independent craftsmen. The UPA is concerned about the manpower shortages that affect the prospects of development in the craft sector and is also conscious that practicing social responsibility should not only be seen as an obligation for large companies but also for SMEs. Thus, it plays a crucial role in sensitising and mobilising employers to apply culturally unbiased and diversity-based recruitment practices and, more specifically, in supporting the creation of a network of employers who support the objectives of the DP;
- The third partner is the CIAM (Collectif Interculturel d'Associations de Migrants), an NGO representing 12 Migrants' associations, which provides a range of services and support to migrant groups or individuals and operates as an observatory on intercultural relations in the region.

This close alliance of an employers' organisation, a training centre and an association representing immigrant communities is seen by all three partners as an important innovation in the region and a pre-condition for the success of the DP. It also provides one of the few examples, amongst the DPs launched in France under the EQUAL Theme B, of the active involvement of SMEs in combating racial discrimination.

### **Mutual Gains from Cooperation**

What cements this entente together is the fact that all three partners are convinced that close cooperation between them will result in tangible gains for their respective "client" groups. These gains include:

- For those who are discriminated against in the labour market:
  - access to a work preparation programme or "stage", including training, individual assessment of competences and assistance in applying for a job or apprenticeship;
  - follow up and personalised support by trainers and mediators for up to one year after the stage;
  - contacts with employers from a network of enterprises that adhere to the principle of non-discrimination, and thus a better chance of placement in work.
- For employers:
  - access to a pool of validated competences or skills that can be tapped to overcome emerging staff shortages;
  - services to assist in the analysis of staff needs, and practical support related to recruitment.

In addition, the partners expect that their cooperation will yield new experience and insights that will contribute to ensuring a better articulation between current training provision and employment services and the new prospects of the labour market. This will also benefit both client groups in the medium term perspective.

The partners meet regularly in a series of workshops to explore, and decide on, the methods and means that should be used to match the capabilities of job seekers facing discriminatory practices with employers' needs and prospects of development. This intensive exchange enables a consolidated approach to action which capitalises on the complementary interests and experiences of the three partners. These include an awareness of challenges and opportunities in the craft industry and a commitment to the social responsibility of SMEs, which are brought in by the UPA and employers, an expertise in issues relating to discrimination in the labour market that is offered by the CIAM and a long standing experience of training and work preparation programmes for disadvantaged groups that is provided by AEFTI Marne.

## **A COORDINATED AND STREAMLINED APPROACH TO ACTION**

*Compétences & Différences* builds on the work of its predecessor DP<sup>1</sup> which was implemented during the first Round of EQUAL. Karim Bekdache explains the progression in this way, "our first project was very much focused on training and work preparation for disadvantaged groups and on establishing good communication with employers' organisations on issues relating to discrimination and racial inequality. It has paved the way for our current Development Partnership. But it has also highlighted the difficulties



of involving individual enterprises actively in our work. In our new project, we have put much more emphasis on offering practical assistance to enterprises to help them with their recruitment procedures. The smaller the size of an enterprise the more it is confronted with a need for services and support to make the right decisions on this issue."

### **A Laboratory for Action**

The linchpin for coordinating and delivering the action of *Compétences & Différences* is the "Laboratory" which offers, under one umbrella, access to a range of information and support services for both employers and jobseekers. By establishing the laboratory, the partners involved in the DP have created the operational platform to bring about the concrete gains that they are expecting from their cooperation. The technical facilities of this platform are located in Reims, but it is also intended to develop mobile outlets that will provide an opportunity to access the laboratory from all the major centres of population within the region.

By spring 2006, about 150 enterprises had subscribed to the laboratory. They pay a discretionary membership fee for the use of its services and commit themselves to register their job vacancies or intentions to recruit with the laboratory.

Jobseekers who want to access the laboratory must be enrolled in a work preparation or training programme provided by AEFTI Marne or be a member of one of the organisations represented by the CIAM. They are offered specific guidance on the rules and modalities under which the laboratory operates.

### **Encouraging Social Responsibility**

Other parallel activities of the DP are aimed at actively promoting commitment to the principles of social responsibility and diversity amongst SMEs. These activities include:

- The provision of a training module for future entrepreneurs in the craft industry to familiarise them with the concept of social responsibility and good practices related to tackling discrimination in the labour market. The DP is seeking to establish this module as a compulsory element in all the training programmes that are organised by the regional Chamber of Crafts. Current estimates suggest that, within the next ten years, about 45% of all firms in the craft sector will go out of business because the owner-managers are getting older and there are often problems in finding a successor. Therefore, sensitising future entrepreneurs is seen by the DP as an important step in mainstreaming its principle of non-discrimination;
- The second area of activity involves the creation of an *Association for the Promotion of Social Responsibility of Enterprises in the Craft Industry*, and the establishment of a *Social Responsibility Label*, to support and encourage employers' commitment in this field. This activity also has an ambitious transnational dimension. Together with its partners in Spain and Italy, *Compétences & Différences* is currently working on the creation of a European Association that will federate protagonists from all three Member States and seek to harness social responsibility as a means of combating discrimination.
- Since its beginning, *Compétences & Différences* has made encouraging progress. About 75% of those who have completed a work preparation or training programme organised by the DP have actually been placed in employment, an apprenticeship scheme or other training leading to a recognised qualification. Possibly the most significant outcome of the DP's work in both Rounds of EQUAL is reflected in the fact that the partners see initial, but very clear, indications of a change in the relationship between the world of training and the employers' associations in the region, as there is now much more communication on the issue of non-discrimination. Now, *Compétences & Différences* is well placed to make a tangible contribution to the implementation of the Territorial Plan to Fight Discrimination that was launched, in Reims, in November 2005.

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Links to EQUAL database description: [Competences&Difference - FR-CHA-2004-42245](#)

[OLMO](#) - Transnational Partnership

[Discriminations Raciales, Xénophobie, Formation et Emploi : Réponses Concrètes](#) -

Development Partnership EQUAL round 1