

Changing perceptions of immigration: from threat to opportunity



Ex-Yugoslavia (53%) and Turkey (17%). Against this background, the eastern enlargement of the EU and the dismantling of the border with the Czech Republic have fermented fears among the population about a new wave of immigration.

"We need to stimulate a sustainable process of reflection upon these issues. Fear is a poor adviser. We must remove the frontiers that exist in the people's minds. This is why information and raising awareness of the general public are the core activities of the project" said Alfred Obermüller, a Member of Parliament, at a press conference that outlined the ambitions of the Living and Working Together Development Partnership (DP). Under the overall management of the regional branch of the Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) in Linz, this project has been one of the few EQUAL projects where a trade union has taken the lead role.

Putting unjustified fears into perspective

Living and Working Together launched a well-targeted and diversified information campaign to convince the population a change in attitudes to migrants and minorities was essential both for the economic development and social inclusiveness of the region. It consisted of three distinct but mutually reinforcing actions to raise the public's awareness about xenophobia and racism and to promote the empowerment of minorities. These actions generated considerable interest from local and regional media.

"Before we began our work in the DP, such positive reporting about our Czech neighbours was unimaginable. Our programme has clearly helped to put into perspective many wrong perceptions and unjustified fears." Gabriele Lackner-Strauss, Chair of the Chamber of Employers in Freistadt.

The number of foreign residents in Upper Austria has grown by 40% since the early 1990s, now representing more than 7% of the region's population. The most significant immigrant groups come from

Firstly, regional development was promoted as one of the benefits of a cross-border labour market. Though EU enlargement was opening up new perspectives for change and growth, employers and their workforces were very sceptical about these opportunities, mainly because they were not yet familiar with strategies for cross-border regional development. The DP launched a comprehensive programme of information seminars and workshops together with a successful mobile exhibition. The programme addressed employers and employees, those responsible for labour market policy and local decision makers. It stimulated debate on the opportunities emerging from the eastern enlargement, on issues related to "new migration" and on the integration of "traditional" migrants and minorities. In addition, Local Community Dialogue events brought together members of municipal councils, mayors, local associations and multipliers and a bi-lingual regional information platform was developed that continues to be accessible via the internet.

Reporting racism and supporting victims

Secondly, a central Anti-Racism Contact Point (ARAS) with five local branches was set up by one of the NGO partners in the DP to identify, document and follow up racist/xenophobic incidents. The service offers legal information, advice and a multi-stage process of practical support to victims of racism. A regional Advisory Council has also been established, in cooperation with the police, to provide guidance on how to follow up cases reported, and a series of 20 anti-racism workshops were organised.

Thirdly, the Trade Union Federation piloted a model for a new type of intercultural training course which involves the paired participation of shop stewards and fellow workers from migrant or minority origin.

An opportunity, not a threat

There is now a more open attitude towards cross-frontier cooperation amongst employers in the border area and especially amongst SMEs, and a much stronger interest in exploring the potential of the new market. *"Initially, I saw enlargement as a threat. I was afraid of the new, and possibly fierce, competition and felt that the government should do more to protect domestic companies. I now realise that we must adapt to the new situation and I now*

know how I can do that. The opening of the labour market has provided new opportunities to develop our business, together with Czech partners. My first contact with them has shown me that they face problems that are very similar to ours," said Walter, who runs a small transport firm.

The DP brought together a partnership of nine key regional actors concerned that negative attitudes to immigration would hamper the region's capacity to tap into the new opportunities emerging from the opening of the labour market.

Government involvement lent weight

The first step in confronting this challenge was the creation of a common platform for planning and action that involved all the relevant stakeholders, including both operators in the field and the strategic partners. This structure and the direct involvement of the regional government gave the DP greater recognition and, in turn, stimulated the accountability and commitment of the individual partners. It also helped in the allocation of clear and distinct responsibilities and in ensuring that these were respected. The cooperative working and information processes within the Partnership created a climate of mutual trust helping to demonstrate good practice and achieve effective outcomes.

Strategic partners, who include the Chamber of Employers, the Chamber of Workers, the regional Government and relevant NGOs, provided advice and policy support in the design, coordination and development of all actions. Perhaps more importantly, they are also helping to ensure that most of the activities piloted by Living and Working Together will be continued as part of mainstream programmes in Upper Austria.

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm

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