

A LABORATORY OF ORIGINAL AND SHARED SOLUTIONS

The EQUAL Polish National Thematic Network (NTN) may be a relatively new grouping, but it is already showing its promise. In fact, since its set up in October 2005, it has got off to a flying start! In less than a year, it has already developed a busy and inventive programme of network meetings and activities, something that is even more impressive given that Poland (as with other new Member States) has only joined the EQUAL programme in the second round.

The Adaptability network is one of five NTN's that have been set up in Poland. All of these networks have a different thematic focus, but retain a similar structure composed of a number of sub-groups, each with a separate social focus (disabled people, prisoners, flexible forms of work, etc.). This structure is therefore reflected in the Adaptability network, a network that aims to address the adaptability of companies and vulnerable workers in response to the deep-seated changes that have affected the country's economy and society in recent years.

Looking closer at the Adaptability network, its thematic focus is not just achieved by providing an open place for discussion, for sharing good practice and innovative ideas, but also by providing a spring board for the results of the EQUAL projects to reach key actors, at all levels. This spring board has been made possible thanks to the extensive participation of different actors in the network itself. Aside from projects, there are policy makers, social partners *and* thematic experts, all of whom have been able to provide support *inside*, as well as ensure impact *outside* the network.

The network has also become a sort of laboratory for shared solutions – a laboratory that has become even more effective owing to its democratic and innovative process, known as the “validation of results and good practice”. This process is even more distinctive in Poland: it forms a compulsory part of the application procedure for the dissemination and mainstreaming phase of EQUAL, and has a strong democratic emphasis giving each network member an equal voting right.

Last, but not least, the network is a learning place for projects. Training and seminars have been organised on a regular basis to give the projects all the support they need to develop. Self-evaluation techniques, lobbying and public relations methods, and management skills all feature in the “catalogue” of training opportunities provided by the network. Here then, the role of the network has very much been one of guiding and supporting the projects by giving them the right tools to develop their own action plans and strategies. It has also provided a forum which they can count on, something that can steer them in the right direction to better their success!

Thanks to all of these elements, the Polish network has developed a remarkable freshness and originality...all in an amazingly short space of time. As Danuta Mozdzenska-Mrosek, coordinator for the network, says:

“EQUAL is a creator of original and atypical solutions to social problems and the network is a reflection of this creativity. It is a place where people from different backgrounds sit together to discuss common problems. Its originality is in the variety of the actors who participate in it”.

LEAVING NO STONE UNTURNED

So what's in the detail of the Polish network? What exactly is it trying to achieve? And what are its main goals and aspirations?

First of all, the EQUAL network can be compared to an agora, acting as a discussion forum for the members of the network, a place where everybody can express ideas and exchange opinions. Through the organisation of an exceptionally high number of meetings – up to six per year! - the projects have the possibility of meeting a vast spectrum of people, ranging from representatives: from ministries and central institutions (especially the Ministry of Regional

Development and Labour), through to the EQUAL National Support Structure, Managing Authority and Monitoring Committee; from other projects and independent experts, through to social partners (employers organisations and trade unions) and non-governmental organisations.



Coordinators of the NTN: Małgorzata Kuś-Konieczna, Bogusław Klimczuk and Danuta Mozdzińska-Mrosek

In terms of specific roles, the experts have been chosen from public and private bodies, academic institutions and other organisations acting in the network's thematic field. Their main role has been to participate in the evaluation of the projects and the assessment of their potential results. They have also been able to offer advice to the projects, sharing their expertise and know-how.

Another feature of the Polish network has been the presence of other project representatives, not only from other themes of the EQUAL initiative, but also from other EU programmes such as LEONARDO. The involvement of these projects has been crucial in enabling network members to take advantage of

complementary tools and solutions that have already been successfully tested on the ground.

Turning to the thematic focus of the network, the projects have gathered themselves into three sub-groups: flexible working arrangements, e-learning and support for increased competitiveness. This sub-grouping has worked particularly well. It has facilitated the communication and enhanced the sharing of successful practice between projects with a similar thematic focus. It has also enabled the projects to progressively overcome the natural competition that they had at the beginning, and to now begin to understand that their social strength and political impact can only be achieved through collaboration. And this collaboration can be seen most strongly in the application procedure for the dissemination and mainstreaming phase of EQUAL: DPs can "cluster" together and submit a *joint* application for this phase, thereby establishing a new partnership with an even bigger mainstreaming potential!

As Piotr Stronkowski, deputy director of the Polish Managing Authority, puts it: *"What is especially important in this network is that the projects are developed through continuous dialogue and exchange. If the projects meet, discuss and work together, then original solutions and results will certainly be created"*.

And once these original solutions and results are created, one of the most important roles of the network is to disseminate them to relevant policy makers and practitioners at European, national and regional levels. With this in mind, the network is planning to produce a report, gathering the results of all the Adaptability projects and highlighting what EQUAL has achieved so far. This paper will be presented at the June 2006 meeting of the Strategic Group, a body comprising national and regional policy makers, representatives of parliamentary commissions, trade unions, employer organisations, and members of the EQUAL Monitoring Committee and Managing Authority. The role of the Strategic Group is to identify new directions and innovative solutions for governmental policies, linking these with EQUAL. This role will undoubtedly be helped by the report and other subsequent inputs from the EQUAL network: a perfect illustration of how ways of tackling real problems at the project level, can be made visible at the decisional level!

TESTING THE VALIDITY OF RESULTS: UNITY IS STRENGTH

So what about the process called "validation of results and good practice"? What does it exactly entail?

In essence, the process involves the democratic and collective participation of each member of the network to validate the results and good practice of the EQUAL projects, a sort of peer

review. Most critically, it forms part of the procedure for a project to access additional funding for the dissemination and mainstreaming phase of EQUAL.

The validation session includes several steps: firstly the network announces the external experts and project representative that will be in charge of evaluating the project results and their potential impact on the ground.

Prospective users, as well as employers and trade unions can also be asked to participate in the assessment. Then the next stage is for the project concerned to present an extensive portfolio of documentation highlighting the main features of the project, its outcomes and impact on beneficiaries, to the network.

During the network meeting itself, the DP is also asked to make a brief oral presentation, so that everybody fully understands what the DP is about and is able to participate in the discussions that arise. The penultimate stage (after the written and oral presentation) is for the “evaluators” to express their views. Their analysis is meant to indicate what the potential success of the project is, and what its strengths and weaknesses are. This assessment is based on several evaluation criteria, agreed by the network: Does the result clearly support companies and workers in adapting to economic structural change? Does the result enhance the use of Information Technologies or other technologies within the companies? Beyond these criteria, the evaluators are expected to determine what mainstreaming benefits and innovation will be derived from the result. By responding to all of these questions and criteria, the evaluators are then able to give a complete judgment...and ultimately recommend or reject the result!



Validation of the results and good practice: a project presentation during the third NTN meeting

Here, although the steps may seem easy, the role of the expert is actually quite difficult because the future impact of the result is often hard to see. As one thematic expert put it: *“The predictability of the results presented by the projects is still quite weak. Sometimes we have the feeling that it is too early to say how the result or the tool will tackle social problems on the ground. Nevertheless, this common validation process through the network has to be seen as a lesson for everyone; indeed, the first round of validation will provide an example to other projects of how they can present their results”*.

The last step of the validation process consists of a common vote: each network member can express a positive or negative preference and, by raising their hand, allow the project to access additional funding for the dissemination and mainstreaming phase. In addition to voting, the projects have the opportunity to express their views on the presented result, giving constructive criticism and advice. In cases where a result is rejected, the project concerned can re-elaborate their result, taking into consideration the various recommendations and comments, and then return to the network for another round of validation.

During the first validation session (which took place during the third network meeting in April 2006), four projects presented their results. Three of them received positive feedback from the experts, and were subsequently voted into the dissemination and mainstreaming phase of EQUAL. These results comprised a model for intergenerational learning based on mentoring in couples; new and fair recruitment standards; and tools for e-learning within small and medium enterprises.

So overall, the “validation of results and good practice” can not only be seen as a democratic process, but also a constructive one, whereby innovative solutions take into account the points of view of a whole raft of players.

“The network’s importance is its democratic dynamic. Here, everybody has an equal vote and everybody can express their point of view. Here each project is developed together, every result

is validated through a common process,” said one of the project managers based in northern Poland.

LEARNING THE WAY TO SUCCEED



So we’ve established that the network is a discussion forum *and* a laboratory for new ideas. But in addition to this, the network is very much a place for collective learning. Since its October launch, it has been very active in organising conferences, seminars and training to inform the projects of how to develop their activities and overcome potential obstacles along the way.

The offer of training in particular constitutes a fairly original practice within EQUAL, especially in terms of the topics chosen. The “public relations and lobbying” training organised at the beginning of April 2006 is one such example, covering areas such as media relations, communication techniques and visibility building vis-à-vis policy makers.

The underlying reason behind this training was the importance of helping the projects to communicate and enhance their overall visibility; as commonly recognised, the projects’ best chance of success is by maximising their interaction with public actors, the media and policy makers, all of which requires good communication methods and channels.

An interesting aspect of the training was the way in which the public relations and lobbying tools and techniques were presented and then adapted to real-life situations through the use of workshop-based exercises. The projects were firstly asked to describe their general goals such as: raising knowledge of the training needs, skills and self-esteem of vulnerable workers. Secondly, the projects were asked to present the solutions and results developed to reach these goals, including: intergenerational mentoring, learning portal, job-coaching, job-rotation and flexible working models. From this, the target groups of each project were defined, in terms of: final beneficiaries, social partners and relevant authorities. And finally, a mainstreaming strategy for each project was created, highlighting which public relations and lobbying tools could be best used to reach a specific target group, and giving projects the option of choosing from a long list of proposed mainstreaming activities: seminars, press conferences, publications, web-sites and even more creative, non conventional events such as fashion shows!



Summing up the network is three-fold: a discussion fora, a laboratory for innovation, and an open space for learning. Not an insignificant achievement considering the relative youth of the network...and of course, with plenty more success on the horizon! In the words of the network coordinators,

“This year is as a starting point for projects that are in the process of developing new tools and putting them into practice for the first time. The network responds the needs and requests of each and every one of these projects, answering their questions, helping them to solve problems and ultimately providing them with the proper “equipment” to achieve their goals.”

CONTACT DETAILS

**EQUAL National Support Structure
Task Force for Training and Human Resources
"Cooperation Fund" Foundation**

ul. Górnośląska 4A

PL-00-444 Warszawa

Poland

Phone: +48 22 625 39 37 or 622 19 91

Fax: +48 22 625 28 05

[✉equal@cofund.org.pl](mailto:equal@cofund.org.pl)