

## TACKLING REDUNDANCIES - COACHING THE PLAYERS

*Belgian industry has over the last thirty years undergone profound change: the structure and sectoral composition of its economic activities have been transformed. Employment in the steel, coal, textile and printing sectors experienced a massive decline, especially in the southern province of Wallonia, where machinery was outdated and ill-adapted to accommodate technological change. Companies had also increasingly to deal with the trends of globalisation and outsourcing. From 1970, many large companies closed down, leaving thousands of employees without work. Recent closures in the textile industry include the companies Textile d'Ere, Tourtex and Dunlop, that left over 500 people without a job. In most of these cases, employers were unable to meet their social responsibility towards their employees or to retaining them on the labour market.*

Towards the end of the 90's, the Walloon region attempted to deal with the extremely negative effects of bankruptcies and companies ceasing their activities in Belgium. It created the PAR (Plans d'Accompagnement des Reversions), plans to guide reversion, to support employees facing or already suffering from collective redundancies. The plans included the setup of several temporary 'reversion units', managed in most cases by the social partner, addressing the needs of a specific groups of employees threatened by lay-offs. The services provided within the units included psycho-social support, help with social and administrative procedures, follow-up of training and integration processes, and activities geared towards professional and vocational reintegration, qualifications and employment.

In early 2000, it was clear that, despite some encouraging results, the PAR and its reversion units were certainly not a "waterproof" guarantee for successful job reinsertion or further vocational development of the unemployed. The Plans were criticised as being just a "spoonful of sugar" to make massive redundancies more "socially acceptable" rather than a means of working effectively on restructuring the economy to avoid future lay-offs and on ensuring access to employment for people left without a job. It was perceived that the reversion units had been set up in a very ad-hoc manner, often at the last moment, without strategic thinking by the partners and without a reliable method to make them succeed. The units were also criticised for the insufficient involvement of the public employment services FOREM, the Walloon office for vocational training and employment.

### INTEGRATED RESOURCES CENTRE FOR LAID-OFF EMPLOYEE



**Information session organised by one of the reversion units, ARTLAINE**

In response to the critique and gaps identified in the PAR, FOREM used the EQUAL Adaptability theme to set up the DECRIRE Development Partnership (DP). DECRIRE acts as an integrated resource centre for reversion, which aims to improve the PAR. It has done so through the development of a practical tool and method which can be used to ensure a timely set up of reversion units, to manage these units on the basis of a harmonised and strategic approach that ensures maximum support to the (ex-) employees. As a fully standardised approach would not work in the different sectors and regional contexts, specific efforts have been made to make sure that the tool and method are sufficiently flexible to succeed in different circumstances.

DECRIRE is not just FOREM. In order to engage all stakeholders in the area of employment and vocational training the DP also includes two major Belgian trade unions (the FGTB – the general labour federation of Belgium and the CSC, its Christian counterpart), as well as several sector employee organisations.

DECRIRE has been a huge success. In 2003, 18 reconversion units in various sectors (including the textile, construction, glass and transport sectors) were set up in the Walloon region with the help of the new tool and method. Within these units, 4,314 workers benefited from the assistance and training and 60% to 90% of these workers found a new job



**Key representatives of Décrire: Anny Poncin (Forem), Daniel Larcy (textile sector), Ghislain Dethy (trade union) and Valter Cortese (Free university of Brussels)**

## **AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO REINSERTION – RAPID RESPONSES TO SOCIAL THREATS**

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As an initial output DECRIRE published a guide to reconversion, to be used to speed up the creation and running of reconversion units. Timeliness is essential in dealing with redundancies, as people are often traumatised and at risk of exclusion and long-term unemployment if not helped immediately.

The guide talks through the overall mandate and objectives of a unit, the key partners to involve in its establishment, the potential role and functions of each of the partners, and their rights and obligations.



**Training for a new job in a marble factory in Nivelles, Belgium**

The guide also includes a model for managing the reconversion unit, with concrete advice on how the partners, once brought together, should go about coordinating the unit and developing a strategic work programme.

The principles of the guide are clear and easy to understand as it also includes a checklist, that “newborn” reconversion units can use to check, step-by-step, whether they had taken into account all requirements for their successful creation and operation. In addition for those who were still uncertain after having gone through the entire guide, DECRIRE also provides consultation and face-to-face support.

“Through this publication, we are able to introduce a clear and concise reconversion programme to companies facing bankruptcy or ceasing their activities. We can also offer timely and adequate services to those at risk of unemployment and social exclusion. The strong support of the social partners was crucial to overcome the difficulties we experienced in the past.” Said Anny Poncin from FOREM.

## **NEW PARTNERSHIPS TO IMPROVE OLD HABITS**

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As the first reconversion units were accused of not involving the right partners, or not engaging all partners sufficiently, DECRIRE placed a strong emphasis on getting the right actors on board to develop the guide which advised on who to involve in such units.

FOREM was the most appropriate organisation to lead the DP. As a public employment service, it has direct access to information on job and vocational training opportunities, which are essential to the success of a reconversion unit.

It was essential to involve the trade unions (FGTB and CSC) in the development of the Guide. In mass-redundancies, they are the ones who link directly with those threatened with unemployment. Their participation in developing the guide was particularly important to ensure the “human” and social dimension when advising on how to create a reconversion unit. After all, such units are not just a place to find new job or to identify training opportunities, they are first and foremost a place of solidarity and understanding. The two national trade unions were backed up with several smaller sectoral organisations defending the rights and the interests of employees and providing specific contextual perspectives when developing the guide.

In addition, the Research Centre of the Free University of Brussels ensured methodological and analytical support for building the guide, as well as the monitoring of its application.

The added value of the partnership is highlighted through the cooperation of different sectors and stakeholders: trade unions and sectoral employer organisations worked together in order to achieve common goals. The DECRIRE DP can be described as an “umbrella” organisation, which created communication and coordination channels for actors who had little previous experience of working together, and have in the past been very reluctant to do so. EQUAL has shown them the benefits of cooperation.

## HELPFUL TOOLS FOR MAINSTREAMING RE-CONVERSION

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As the first results of the guide were very promising, the DECRIRE partners realised that it was essential to “spread the news” and to encourage its further use. More importantly, it was also time to make regional and local politicians aware of its success. They developed a toolkit, which includes presentations of the guide and its results and brochures summarising the content and ideas behind the guide.

But the “masterpiece” of the toolkit is the DVD, in which employees give testimonials on how the work of properly organised reconversion units have changed their lives. The DVD also includes a visit to a reconversion unit, with commentators explaining how the unit works and on which organisational and work principles it is based. One participant comments on how the reconversion unit increased his hopes for a better vocational future: “For me taking part in the activities has been a big step forward – a door wide open. When my company closed down, I found out about the range of training opportunities offered by FOREM as well as advice on how to find a new job which could drastically improve my chances of finding work.

This support really helped me in this terrible time. That was great. After a few weeks, I felt stronger and much more ready to face new employers. I am now working in a completely new sector, but using the skills I gained in my previous job.”

DECRIRE then ensured the proper distribution of the toolkit, and presented it to politicians, employers, social partners and many others who could potentially benefit from the method developed by the DP.

One of the main achievements of the DP at the political level was the adoption of a Decree by the Ministry of the Region of Walloon concerning the Reconversion Support Plan. The Decree states that workers affected by a collective redundancy have the right to benefit from the coaching and support offered by reconversion units. More importantly, it also sets out the procedures for developing and running reconversion plans, which directly integrate the tools and guidance



*Sharing views with partners from Italy and France, third transnational meeting (December 2003) in Mons (Belgium)*

developed by the DECRIRE DP. Through this new legal instrument, reconversion can now be applied strategically and effectively on the ground. The adoption of this law is the ultimate symbol of the DECRIRE's success, and instantly widens its impact to the whole Walloon region.

But DECRIRE is preparing to go beyond the national borders and has presented its success story on the occasion of several international events. As a result of this, DPs from Italy and France have shown a keen interest in the tool and method developed, and are currently looking into the possibilities of transferring and adapting these to their own national contexts.

**Development Partnership:** BEfr-20 – Decrire

**National partners:** FOREM, CAREMPLOI, CEFRET and ULB - Travail Emploi Formation

**Transnational partnership:** TCA 2693 *Compétences contre discriminations*

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A short version of this "Success story" and other "Success stories" are available on the [EQUAL website](#)