

ADAPTABILITY – LIFELONG LEARNING THEME

‘NTN SUCCESS STORIES’

Final Report

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ADAPTABILITY – LIFELONG LEARNING - THEME 3 E - NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKS – SUCCESS STORIES

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKING IN EQUAL

From day one, EQUAL's overriding mission has been to influence policy and practice beyond the lifetime of the projects that it funds. What innovative tools and approaches have EQUAL projects developed that could be adopted by practitioners in the future? What lessons and good practice have emerged from EQUAL projects that could inform and benefit policy makers from now on? These are the key questions that EQUAL has sought to answer – and most importantly act upon – in undertaking its work. And for this to happen on the EQUAL theme of Lifelong Learning (which falls under the Adaptability pillar), nine Member States have successfully set up National Thematic Networks (NTN).

1.2. WHAT DID THE NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKS LOOK LIKE?

The NTNs set up under the lifelong learning theme were wide ranging. The number of projects per NTN varied from four (Austria) to as many as 20 (the Netherlands). The majority of these NTNs consisted solely of projects from the lifelong learning theme. Exceptions were for example the Greek and the Irish NTNs, which also included projects from the Employability and Equal Opportunities pillars.

Only a few NTNs had one particular focus within the theme of lifelong learning depending on the burning issues within each Member State. For example, the Greek NTN put effort in urging the government, on the basis of the results obtained from its projects, to set up a national validation system that had not been previously available. The Dutch NTN was also concerned with the validation of prior learning by using portfolios, as well as focussing on making sure that specific target groups facing obstacles to entering the labour market can obtain at least a minimum qualification. In Portugal on the other hand the NTN was not focused on only one specific theme, but had built its activities around three topics: on-the-job training, mobilisation for lifelong learning and skills certification. Other NTNs, like for example the one in Austria, centred its activities on optimising the supply and demand of further education opportunities. In the Great Britain, a specific focus was put on the NTN on increasing the number of people having basic skills, which is a priority on the political agenda. The German NTN had set up two subgroups: the first one focussing on SMEs and issues related to the labour market competence, whereas the second one focussed on individuals and issues such as individual coaching, job mentoring, etc.

All NTNs consisted of a variety of members including the project staff and their partner organisations, relevant representatives of ministries, social partners, independent experts and members of training and education institutes. The Swedish NTN was based on the so-called triple helix, including representatives from university, business and governments. Several NTNs, like for example the Dutch and German ones operated under the leadership of the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs.

1.3. NETWORKING ON LIFELONG LEARNING IS CHALLENGING

The success of the NTNs has not been achieved without some difficulties and obstacles along the way. In order to tackle these obstacles, the NTNs have learnt and have come up with innovative and creative solutions in order to be able to move on.

Working on lifelong learning involves a multitude of sub-issues and consequently actors

The theme of lifelong learning is not a straightforward subject matter. It encompasses a multitude of related sub-issues and these sub-issues can generate significant debate depending on which view point you are looking from: employers, employees, ministries, training institutes, social partners, etc. This is the first challenge that all the NTN have been faced with: how to filter out the exact messages from the different project activities across the different sub-issues, and how to make these clear to policymakers coming from several different ministries whose interest in lifelong learning crosses more than one policy field.

Lifelong learning is not only the concern of ministries and policy makers. Training and education institutions, employers and employees, as well as unemployed people and other target groups also have to engage in the subject of lifelong learning, as well as spread good practice from one organisation to the other. And this is exactly what the NTNs did: spreading the message of progress made in the area of lifelong learning to all relevant actors at local, regional and national level.

Creating the right opportunities and sharing ideas

The purpose of EQUAL NTNs is to encourage an informal exchange of experience and ideas, and create opportunities for common learning among the EQUAL partnerships. Even more so, it provides them with a chance to explore new ways of working and test out practice which has never been tested before. Through the NTNs, projects can share the lessons they have learnt and together identify the most successful practice which can then be presented at policy level and make a real impact on policy processes. The projects can also work together to create networks and links between organisations which have never existed before. In doing so, they increase their potential and can put weight in policy debates with different institutional actors. As part of the lifelong learning NTN, EQUAL projects have been able to debate, collaborate, and above all work to bring about change in terms of achieving lifelong learning for all. They have brought concrete solutions according to specific problems and specific target groups, be them for the employed or those who still seek to re-enter the labour market. Tailor-made solutions have been offered to policy and decision makers who up until that time were often struggling with finding the right answers in the area of lifelong learning.

Keeping all NTN members informed and convinced

A huge challenge with which all NTNs are confronted is keeping their members interested, as well as up to date with all the progress achieved by the projects. This difficulty is even more challenging for NTNs lacking the necessary resources or having to manage quite a high number of projects. It is absolutely crucial to be sure that the members are convinced of the good practice before being able to convince other, more external people. Here again, the NTNs have shown how creative they can be: thematic breakfasts, exchange meetings involving the beneficiaries, project visits to 'thinking dinners' involving a huge number of relevant stakeholders have been organised. On these occasions it was possible to make clear to the members what it was they were putting effort into, as well as showing them what opportunities for change existed, especially for the target groups involved.

2. THE SUCCESS OF THE NTNs

Despite all the challenges that have had to be faced, the results of the NTNs have been quite successful in creating the necessary links with policy and decision makers by showing them clearly and in the right language what the benefits of the EQUAL approaches to lifelong learning are. Even if not all the results have been finalised yet, it can be said that they are definitely well on their way. Ministries, organisations and people have all been involved in the NTNs and the products developed by the partnerships are visible through the creation of new networks, new policy proposals, proposals for amendments to existing legislation, new debates between social partners, new methodologies for successful networking and the contribution to national policy strategies and systems.

All national networks were invited to provide a general overview of their objectives, actions, results and outcomes through a survey that included all those responsible for networking at national level. This first review helped the identification of four networks that seemed to have been particularly successful. They made a real difference, whether it was with regard to policy development, to legislative proposals or in the area of organisational change. Their stories are told below.

For a summary of the NTN across all nine Member States, please refer to Annex 1 at the end of this report.

NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK – GREAT BRITAIN

HELPING TO SKILL THE NATION

In Great Britain, the NTN for Lifelong learning under EQUAL has clearly demonstrated how an EQUAL network can be closely aligned with wider policy agendas. Through the network's ability to understand how to fit with national strategies and with continuous support from a key policy team in the Department for Education & Skills (DfES), projects from Development Partnerships (DPs) have shown how different approaches can help disengaged individuals to take up learning.

A key figure in the development of the NTN was Barry Brooks from the DfES Skills for Life Strategy Unit (SfLSU), formerly the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU). In chairing the network for several years, Barry Brooks gave a momentum and important policy focus to the NTN's activities. Moreover, through his personal belief in the value of the network, he was instrumental in providing network members with opportunities to feed directly into national policy. Barry Brooks comments:

“Convincing individuals and organisations of the advantages of learning, and removing barriers that may deter people from learning is a priority. EQUAL can play a big part as it provides the opportunity to test new approaches for improving the nation's literacy, language and numeracy. EQUAL projects have already made a significant contribution to the Government's Skills for Life Strategy”.

The GB NTN is a fine example of how an innovative, national network can link projects and policy colleagues to each other where potential complementarities of work agendas exist. In terms of specifics, the NTN very clearly assisted the Government in reaching its targets on basic skills for 2001-2004. Furthermore, it has helped inform DfES about community-based outreach and ways to move disadvantaged learners into learning, providing a 'menu' of what does and does not work. Finally, the NTN has helped inform DfES on contextual learning, which has been an issue introduced as part of measures for 'Embedded Skills for Life' (making the learning context meaningful, useful and relevant to the learner).

Through the NTN, representatives from DfES have been exposed to innovative activities and seen how these activities can contribute to the Skills for Life agenda. In doing so, EQUAL projects, with the support of the NTN, have been able to demonstrate the difference they can make to hard-to-reach individuals in a way that the Government has not always been able; understandably, this has attracted the Government's attention.

RESPONDING TO A GROWING PROBLEM

As Will Thompson from the EQUAL GB Managing Authority points out *“there is an issue about basic skills in this country”*. Indeed, there is still an estimated 5.2 million adults with literacy skills below the minimum level 1 (below GCSE Grade D to G), and 14.9 million adults with numeracy skills below that level. DfES as a government department has been a key policy driver for solutions. This role has been strengthened and extended through the NTN by placing Barry Brooks as the network Chair. This direct participation of DfES on the NTN has helped EQUAL projects to think strategically about what really needs to be done at local, regional and national level in terms of basic skills and lifelong learning.

Basic skills and lifelong learning correspond to two of the European Integrated Guidelines for Employment accompanying targets, against both of which the UK is lagging behind:

- At least 22% of 22 year olds in the EU should have completed upper secondary education by 2010.
- The EU average level of participation in lifelong learning should be at least 12.5% of the adult working-age population (25-64 age group).

To achieve these objectives and in line with national priorities, the UK has started to rethink how it engages with disengaged learners, with programmes like EQUAL providing an interesting pool of innovative approaches to reaching out and engaging adults in learning. For the Government, a key success factor for meeting its EU and UK performance targets is finding and supporting new ways of engaging learners in the UK.

BUILDING A PLATFORM FOR SYNCHRONISATION

In 2003, the DfES launched its Skills for Life Strategy around basic skills (numeracy and literacy) and lifelong learning. Barry Brooks from DfES became Chair of the NTN around the same time. He immediately saw the potential of the NTN in becoming a tool to push new ways of engaging with learners, and ensuring that approaches developed through EQUAL projects are in line with national priorities.

At the time the NTN and the 2003 Skills for Life Strategy were launched, DfES was intensively focusing on widening learning participation essentially focusing on further education routes. The devolved authorities in Scotland and Wales have also taken a lead in addressing these issues. Through the NTN, DfES has since been able to look at innovative ways and long term approaches to engaging with disadvantaged people from within the communities, and creating contexts and approaches that are relevant to their needs and situations. According to Barry Brooks:

“Government normally put policy into practice, but the NTN has helped to put practice into policy”.

Indeed, the successful community-based outreach and learning routes that projects have developed on the basis of a common understanding acquired through the NTN has turned DfES' attention to these areas, and the department has since been able to feed this into its Skills for Life Strategy through its 'Embedded Skills for Life' routes.

The above results and mutual benefits have however taken great effort and learning from both sides. Throughout the time of EQUAL, DfES has participated in all the meetings and sent its policy development team along with the Chair for information to be fed back to the policy department.

Through EQUAL Round 1, DfES ensured that a lot of events and meetings were organised, working closely with the EQUAL Managing Authority, and the GB Support Unit. The success factor of this NTN was that its participants went to a wide range of national and regional conferences relating to different aspects of the basic skills and lifelong learning agendas. These were all wider policy events, which allowed NTN members to:

- be exposed to the wider issues;
- be in contact with outside policy actors and be alongside people from national funds and wider policy remits; and
- create a platform for continuing relationships between projects and relevant government bodies/institutions.

Although Barry Brooks has now left the DfES he will continue his involvement in the NTN, working closely with former colleagues in the SfLSU. For all those involved in the NTN, there is a clear hope and confidence that the fruitful cooperation will continue through the second half of EQUAL and beyond. The NTN will also be looking to build on close links with policy teams in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on the emerging issues related to an ageing workforce.

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NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK - GREECE

VALIDATION OF SKILLS AND COMPETENCES – WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHANGE

How can EQUAL partnerships best influence and make a contribution to policy? By formulating policy proposals themselves! That was the innovative approach taken by the NTN on the validation of vocational skills and competences set up in Greece. The network prepared and presented a policy proposal to the Ministry of Employment and Social Protection in response to its call for a national system for the accreditation of occupational qualifications and a greater link between vocational training and employment to meet the needs of individuals and the labour market. The aim of the network's proposal was to making concrete suggestions for such a system of accreditation based on the experiences and good practice of EQUAL partnerships working in this field in Greece. This system would help a jobseeker highlight the knowledge and skills he or she has gained outside the conventional education system by giving such knowledge and experience an official 'stamp of approval'. The policy proposal contained concrete suggestions on how a national system for the accreditation of competences could be set up in favour of all actors involved.

The new law was passed by the Greek government in July 2005. It incorporates several elements necessary for the setting up of an accreditation system, which have been taken from the results of the network's work. This includes the methodology to follow, the use of job profiles, individual approaches to lifelong learning and the participation of social partners in the consultation process. The network's joint effort was instrumental in the passing of this new legislation on the accreditation of vocational skills and competences in Greece.

"The institutional impact of the network was great" explained Tina Orfanidou, an independent evaluator of the EQUAL programme in Greece, "because it succeeded in initiating a new law which was passed at national level. In this way, the network has been able to achieve vertical mainstreaming."

Another successful outcome of the network has been the production of a good practice guide which presents examples of the innovative practice developed by EQUAL partnerships in Greece. It also showcases the concrete results of the network and the methodology it used to achieve its aims. This guide was distributed at the network's final conference and mainstreaming event held in April 2005 which brought together all relevant European and Greek policy makers. This important event was also the occasion when the network formally presented its policy proposal to the Greek authorities. Through the presentation and dissemination of the network's results and achievements in this way, the final conference also concluded the successful collaboration of the network.

THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

In contrast to other countries in the European Union, Greece was one of the few EU Member States not to have a national law on the accreditation of skills. Though there were a lot of vocational training centres running important activities, a systematic approach on how to validate professional skills and recognise and certify professional activities was lacking. There was no national system for the recognition and accreditation of skills or knowledge acquired through non-traditional means. This meant that some people could be excluded from the labour market

because they do not have the required official diplomas or qualifications to apply for a job, despite the fact that they may have the knowledge and skills to do it. An accreditation system could help them get their skills and experience officially recognised and increase their chances of finding employment. Vivian Galata, the network's expert, describes the situation which existed:

“The lack of a national system for the accreditation of skills or knowledge acquired through vocational programmes was a real policy gap. The aim of the second Community Structural Funds was to have a coherent policy on vocational training and on the accreditation of vocational skills. Community programmes like EQUAL have given the motive to open up discussions and adopt initiatives in this area.”

When the network was set up in 2003, the government was in the process of examining a legislative proposal which mentioned the necessity for a national accreditation system for skills and competences, and a better examination of the needs of the labour market. This initial draft legislation linking vocational education and training with employment was a first step in finding a remedy for this gap: it proposed the establishment of a unified system of certification with common principles and rules. While this initiative described what needed to be done, it didn't explain 'how to do it'. This network's task was clear: to come up with the criteria and the methodology as well as the necessary tools to propose how to proceed to set up a system of accreditation. The network was set up with the express purpose to respond to this urgent need.

“Since there were EQUAL partnerships in Greece working on this particular issue and the relevant government agencies were participating in these partnerships as well as in the network, we decided we could do something as the time was right,” explained Kimon Pappas from the Managing Authority who was also an important network partner.

FILLING THE GAP

The network started its work with a first meeting in October 2003, bringing together a variety of actors, including nine EQUAL partnerships working in Greece on EQUAL themes related to lifelong learning, adapting to change, reintegration to the labour market and combating racism, as well as institutional agencies involved in validation issues who are also partners in various EQUAL projects. This included EKEPIS, the national accreditation centre for continuing vocational training and OEEK, an organisation for initial vocational training and education linked to the Ministry of Education. Other important actors included social partners such as the National Association of Workers and the Chambers of Commerce of Athens and Thessaloniki. A 'core' or steering group was made up of a representative of the Managing Authority who had a supervising and supporting role, an expert who provided technical and scientific guidance, as well as an EQUAL partnership representative who was the main person responsible for the network and overall coordinator.

The network started its work by first agreeing on a common work plan. This was drafted by the coordinator and then discussed in several meetings until agreement was reached by all members. As a first important step, work then started on setting up the criteria to identify good practice. These criteria were based on the EQUAL principles, looking at innovation, added value, transferability, sustainability, and mainstreaming potential, etc. Once collected, the cases of good practice served as the basis for the formulation of conclusions. They were also published as a good practice guide.

The network then decided to divide its work according to the analysis of three thematic actions: 1. Job profiles analysis 2. Tools to identify and evaluate skills and occupational qualifications 3. Criteria and methodology for the accreditation of occupational qualifications. A group was formed for each thematic action. Each of the three groups had a coordinator and held meetings in order to prepare a synthesis report. The three synthesis reports which resulted, as well as the good practice guide, were the basis for the preparation of the legislative proposal.

The policy proposal was written by network members together with input from the trade unions and employers' organisations. All the actors then actively worked together to disseminate the

network's results and publicise the policy proposal. This was presented to the media by different network actors on television and through other media.

The final conference held in April 2005 was a great success with over 200 participants from Greece, as well transnational partners who were invited to share their know-how. At this occasion, the final policy proposal was publicly presented by EKEPIS to ministry officials and others with common interests. The policy document was accepted by the ministry, and influenced the new law of July 2005.

“All the partners involved in the network were extremely committed and this was the reason for our success. We had a very good and dedicated team ready to devote the necessary time, energy and human resources to achieve a concrete result. We also had a very strict timetable and a clear methodology. The proof of our success is the legislation that was passed.”

These words from Efi Karpodini, the network co-ordinator on behalf of the EQUAL partnerships, clearly confirms the success of the network in influencing policy.

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NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK - NETHERLANDS

NO MORE WORDS BUT ACTION!

How can you explain your innovative good method to a high-level policy maker or even more so, how can you convince him or her of the need to change current practice or even legislation on the basis of your successful results? This was the most important aim of the Dutch NTN, namely spreading the message about successful practices under the EQUAL Adaptability pillar to potential users in such a way that 'empathy' with the practice in the field was achieved. More importantly, the NTN successfully took on board this challenge by finding innovative ways to make policy-makers more aware of what practical methods exist to overcome obstacles to reintegration in the labour market.

One of the innovative approaches that the NTN devised to engage policy-makers in its work was the 'thinking dinner'. The concept behind the dinner was to bring policy stakeholders and project representatives together, giving them an opportunity to interact with each other as well as eat. The interaction was stimulated by giving the dinner guests practical problems and topics to discuss and ultimately 'think about' – hence the name.

Dinner was not the only occasion to bring people together and network. The NTN was also very active in organising project visits and exchange meetings, all of which enabled policy makers to see and get a real sense of how to foster lifelong learning on the ground. It was this exposure to successful project practice as part of a dynamic networking environment that really enhanced the multiplier effect of the NTN's work. Kees Verhaar, coordinator of the NTN and a representative of the Ministry of Social Affairs, supports this effect by stating that:

“with policy notes alone you can not learn how best to combine learning with working, but with practical examples you do. Our policy-makers have learned to take the successful practice from the EQUAL projects and promote these to social partners, entrepreneurs, schools, training institutions, municipalities, employment agencies, and so forth. These successful practices do not only consist of innovative methods, but also of creation of networks acting as multipliers to other sectors”.

One of the main outcomes and major successes of the NTN's work was a report detailing the network's activities and putting forward proposals for adjustments to current practice in the fields of work, training and education, employment and equal opportunities.

“I believe the challenge is not thinking but doing. The challenge concerns the organisations which implemented the innovative projects: it is up to them now to 'sell their goods'. But this challenge obviously counts as well for the government: no more words on learning and working but deeds! This is the philosophy behind our project 'Learning and Working' which the Ministries of Social Affairs and Education are now supporting. I count on the fact that we can make use of the practices developed through EQUAL!”.

These words from Renk Roburgh, Director-General of Higher and Vocational Education at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and guest at one of the 'thinking dinners', clearly demonstrate the value that policy makers saw in the NTN and the projects they represented. Through the NTN, projects could truly help to deliver the 'deeds' that individuals like Mr Roburgh were looking for.

OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

The main aim of the NTN was to filter out and spread the results from the 20 Adaptability EQUAL projects. This aim was not to just simply produce some policy papers and hope that the right persons would read them and maybe do something with the information. No, the aim was that the right people would empathise with the project activities and that they would understand what the real benefit was in overcoming barriers in labour market integration. The focus was on identifying the successful innovative methods and instruments that are targeted at learning, improving the combination of lifelong learning and employment, integrating ways of working and working with new technologies. More specifically, the NTN wanted to increase the chances of specific target groups such as early school leavers, long-term unemployed or disabled people in entering the labour market by tackling the obstacles and difficulties existing in current practice and legislation. For the network, it was absolutely crucial to demonstrate ways – through project practice - in overcoming obstacles to full labour market entry and participation.

Traditional hiring procedures which give priority to people who have diplomas are not seen to comply with the guidelines of the European Employment Strategy (EES) which urges Member States to make work a real option for all. Moreover, the aim of lifelong learning for all groups cannot be attained if the same opportunities are not offered to people, simply because they are not traditional learners. An active welfare state should target the development of its human capital, and aim for full participation and integration. Within this context, the NTN provided a means for EQUAL projects working in the field of lifelong learning to disseminate their lessons and good practice.

Jan van den Bos, Director-General of Labour Market Policy and Welfare, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, comments that:

“One of the projects showed that ‘ex-offenders’ are able to gain a basic qualification – an absolute requirement to stand a chance on the labour market. It feels good to know that all participants actively participate to make the project a success. They see it as a last chance and are not willing to let that go!”

He adds that he was very grateful for the intensive contact he had with the EQUAL projects presented through the NTN and experienced this as an inspiring gift. Such a statement provides clear testimony of the impact the NTN had in helping policy makers to overcome the obstacles to lifelong learning.

MAKING THE INTEREST CLEAR TO THE RECEIVER

The NTN only started in May 2003 when the EQUAL projects had already commenced their activities. The first task of the NTN was therefore to ‘catch up’ and get to know the projects and their aims very quickly. Carrying out this task was not as easy as expected owing to difficulties in acquiring monitoring information on the EQUAL projects. However, the NTN responded creatively by turning this problem into a solution: they organised exchange meetings and projects visits. Those involved in the meeting and visits included: employer organisations, civil servants from the ministries of social affairs and education, an expert on accreditation of prior learning from the army, as well as several representatives from the projects.

The typical format for an exchange meeting was not the usual, dull practice of reading aloud policy papers containing vague outcomes. Instead, the project beneficiaries relayed their stories and experiences. Whether it was an early school leaver, an asylum seeker or an ex-prisoner, they all gave a personal message to potential users at policy and legislative level.

“Through this method, the good practice is made clear to potential users and they can feel and acknowledge what the advantage is in practice. It is important that besides the official message, the imagination of the user is sparked” explains Kees Verhaar.

Exchange meetings (and visits) delivered in these innovative formats gave added impact to the NTN. It not only enabled the network to collect project information in an interactive way, thereby overcoming the previous, information-collection difficulties, but also – and most importantly in

securing a high degree of commitment and interest from the participants. As such, the NTN strengthened opportunities to bring about change.

Besides the problem of transferring knowledge from the projects to the NTN, the main challenge the NTN faced was the fact that a lot of EQUAL projects did not understand what the interest of their results was for the policy makers or how they had to make the message clear for those who have to 'spread the word' and change legislation. Again, faced with a challenge, the NTN became creative by launching the concept of a 'thinking dinner'.

Towards the final stage of the projects, when good practice was fully tested and visible, the NTN brought together all the relevant stakeholders, from actors in the field to high level policy makers, to a dinner. The main theme of this dinner was a presentation of the project results. The dinner guests included: project representatives, sitting alongside the ministries of Education, Culture and Science, Justice and Social Affairs, local authorities, employers' organisations, trade unions and training institutes. To help the interaction between these guests, project stories and anecdotes, practical problems and discussion points were presented for people to 'think about' while eating.

"The projects made clear that the obstacles they encounter in legislation are in reality sometimes so small that it is almost amazing we did not tackle them yet. Well, I know that quite often there are some good reasons why these obstacles were not overcome yet in practice but at the same time I promised myself to confront these reasons with the practices of these EQUAL projects!"

As this quote from Renk Roburgh, Director-General of Higher and Vocational Education, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science shows, the 'thinking dinner' (along with other creative methods used by the NTN) made real practical issues on the ground recognisable, meaningful – and most importantly, accessible - to top-level representatives. As such, the NTN made an important step towards mainstreaming at national level.

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NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK - PORTUGAL

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE - AN EMPOWERMENT TOOL FOR EVERY ONE?

One network, two working groups, 13 projects and eight political recommendations. These figures may seem small, but in real terms they represent the key components of a big programme of activities undertaken by the Adaptability NTN in Portugal. Within the EQUAL network framework, Portugal was successful in developing its network around the model of a 'Community of Practice' as a means of disseminating and mainstreaming the outcomes of EQUAL projects. As the following story shows, this model enabled the development of reliable and validated solutions by network members and led to clearly targeted, political recommendations for actors in the field of employment and training.

The impact and dynamism of the NTN based on the 'Community of Practice' model is very encouraging. Network members have commented that the outcomes of the network more than surpassed their original expectations. Moreover, they are still networking and in communication today, which clearly demonstrates the NTN's value, and above all, its potential for sustainability.

FRAMEWORK OF MEASURES

Out of the 25 Member States, Portugal has the highest percentage of workers with a low level education. This has consequences for other aspects of the labour market, namely wage levels and productivity. In addition, Portugal is now suffering from an increase in the unemployment rate, partly due to the negative performance of the main economic indicators, but also due to structural problems.

To address this situation, the National Action Plan for Employment 2003-2006 presented a set of measures, which included the establishment of targets to promote vocational training in enterprises. A crucial focus of these targets was the use of ICT and new skills to facilitate the adaptation of companies and workers. Since the launch of the plan, it has not been received entirely favourably by employers and employees. Employers agree on the need to provide skills for their employees to increase productivity, but cannot find suitable training in line with their needs or solutions to substitute their staff while undergoing training. Additionally the training offered is often expensive and not flexible. On the other hand, employees lack motivation in undertaking training as they do not see the benefits in their everyday job and life.

The Portuguese EQUAL NTN on Adaptability was very effective in responding to the less receptive environment of the National Action Plan. It was able to identify the concerns and expectations of employers and employees, and collect the ideas and good practice of EQUAL projects in dealing with them. As such, the network was responding to a clear 'policy problem' in a very direct, constructive and practical way. Furthermore, according to NTN members, the effectiveness of this response was partly due to the "Community of Practice" model that the NTN used, and the guidelines provided by the EQUAL Managing Authority concerning the validation process.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The EQUAL NTN on Adaptability was set up in July 2003 by the EQUAL Managing Authority (Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs), and consisted of the 13 EQUAL projects that were addressing a range of lifelong learning issues, including innovative training methodologies in the

workplace and commitment levels of workers and employers to lifelong learning. Representatives from these projects included training organisations, companies, workers and social partner organisations, thereby bringing together different stakeholders in adaptability generally, and lifelong learning specifically.

“The network has been set up to capitalise on the results of adaptability projects to answer the needs of the companies with regard to training and to provide them with a working environment promoting training in the workplace” said Maria do Carmo Nunes, from the Portuguese EQUAL Managing Authority.

This network, like the other EQUAL Portuguese networks, was based on a very specific model known as the Community of Practice, developed by the social theorist, Etienne Wenger. Etienne Wenger describes the Community of Practice as a group of *“people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better by interacting regularly”*. The model goes beyond informal networking and incidental interactions between people. It is characterised by a clear and shared competence in a particular field; a community spirit whereby people engage in joint activities and collaborate with each other; and has members who are practitioners, not theorists.

The Portuguese NTN defined three main areas of concern. The first focused on lifelong learning and the second on on-the-job training; there was a third on skills certification, but it did not get off the ground owing to the low number of representative projects.

On joining the NTN, members were able to share concerns and commit to a dynamic process of exchanging experience, continuing learning and finding new solutions to the problems faced. A key factor in the success of this engagement was the use of ‘facilitators’ who were experts in training and lifelong learning, and were responsible for the technical focus and the high standard of the discussions.

“The involvement of these two facilitators gave a great added value to the group”, adds Maria do Carmo Nunes. *“They have personal and relational skills that heightened the interaction and dynamics of the group and contributed strongly to network results”*.

Apart from the facilitators, there was a ‘coordinator’ who was also responsible for the logistics of the networking process, and other key actors and experts who were called upon to take part in the activities and nourish discussions at a higher level.

In terms of activities, the network was very active with monthly on-site meetings, EQUAL projects visits and virtual chats using the CIRCA platform. The intensity and high quality of debate between the participants was particularly fruitful for the development of tools and products, and particularly for the validation of products, that is to say to acknowledge the value of the method or the tools developed by each project. This rather difficult and time-consuming task was in fact really beneficial for the network, provided a new energy and dynamic between the members, and above all, guaranteed the highest quality of project products to be mainstreamed under Action 3 – a “Product validation dossier” should be presented with the Action 3 application form.

“The resources of the network as well as the intervention of external experts on specific themes created a new knowledge that benefited the development of many products” reported Pedro das Neves, the network coordinator.

Based on the reliable tools and discussions emerging from the NTN, a key outcome of the NTN was the development of eight political recommendations presented in the form of a Living Document. These recommendations responded to national concerns and priorities in relation to the adaptation of companies and workers, and particularly the National Action Plan for Employment. For example, they advocate developing the role of ‘mediator’ within the company to promote innovative work practices and learning, which would be underpinned by a national mediator training programme.

These recommendations were presented at a final network conference in May 2005 which was attended by social partners, companies, workers and training organisations. They were also sent to all those people who might be interested by the subject matter: social partners, employer

organisations and specific departments of Ministries. It is still too early to determine the true impact of these recommendations, particularly at the policy level. However, it is clear that the NTN based on the ensured that these recommendations were drawn from highly validated practice thanks to the Community of Practice model and the validation process.

Although the EQUAL NTN is not officially running any more, all the members are still in contact with each other and will no doubt continue to bring benefits to those involved. João Amaro, responsible for an EQUAL project, concludes that

“the EQUAL network brought innovation towards the EQUAL partners combining the use of the Community of Practice methodology which is easily transferable and creates a real pool of expertise that will last for a long time”.

What this positive experience has shown is that networking – and more specifically networking in a Community of Practice - can really enhance views and ways of thinking, as well as wider dissemination and mainstreaming impact.

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For information on the Communities of Practice and Etienne Wenger: www.ewenger.com

3. MAIN LESSONS LEARNT

THE WAY FORWARD

Including the right people from the very start

The most important factor in making the NTN a success is making sure that the right people and organisations are on board from the very start. This is absolutely crucial if the maximum results are to be achieved. Some NTNs have expressed that it has taken a lot of effort to inform members that only joined at a later stage.

Making the right choice for including the relevant stakeholders is only possible through an understanding of how the practices developed by the EQUAL projects can contribute to addressing the problems and obstacles encountered at policy level on engaging all target groups in lifelong learning and securing their (re)integration into the labour market. NTNs have been very strategic in aligning their network activities closely to wider policy agendas and thereby have increased their chances of success. This is equally true for making sure that the right people are approached as potential members. They should be closely related to the ministry department that is to be influenced, as well as have sufficient authority to push messages forward. Some NTNs were led by a ministry department which is obviously a great advantage.

With regard to all the members, efforts should be targeted at all times to keep them enthusiastic about the activities and this can be achieved by giving them an equal voice in the network, as well as making clear to them that they can make a difference.

All this can only be achieved through the set up of an effective structure, clear task divisions and good communication channels. All NTNs have had a particular structure from a 'Community of Practice' to a triple helix structure involving all partners involved in the social dialogue.

Organising dissemination events at the right moment involving the right people...

All NTNs have organised a series of thematic events or conferences to communicate the good practice developed. It is not the organisation of such an event in itself that makes it successful. It is rather the timing of event as well as the invited audience. Most of the NTNs had organised a big event at the end of their activities, when all products and approaches had been tested and proven to be successful. A lot of effort was put in inviting relevant stakeholders who could make a difference. Such events were crucial in ensuring that the good practice was communicated to the right people and therefore being taken on board by the right institutions and organisations.

...and participating in other events

Not only should the NTN organise events, but its members should attend conferences and events whenever possible. Some NTNs have expressed that this was also one of their success factors since it gave them the opportunity to be exposed to wider issues, have contacts with outside policy actors as well as create a platform for continuous relationships between projects and relevant government bodies for future work.

Effectively communicating messages

The innovative approach of some NTNs on how to communicate messages to a wider audience during dissemination events has proven to be very effective. Instead of using the usual practice of sending around reports, themed dinners and particular events have really done the trick. In these gatherings, people's attention is caught because they can meet the beneficiaries themselves explaining they have experienced. To this end some NTNs have experimented with role-playing and thus illustrated what good practice has emerged from the projects. In this way the audience is able to empathise with the context, and retain and communicate more widely the key messages. Equally important is choosing the 'right' language to convince people of your message. Account has to be taken of the target audience to translate the good results in practical tools for them. For example, it is important to translate messages targeted at policy makers in

appropriate legislation proposals whereas training and education institutes need the right tools for lifelong learning or validating skills.

WHAT IS TO BE AVOIDED?

Repeating the existing messages

EQUAL stands for innovation and that is exactly what has to be achieved. Even if the proposed message only considers a little aspect of a much wider policy problem, progress is made. The ministries involved in the NTN have commented that the solution was sometimes so close by but that the right tools were lacking, or that some obstacles had to be overcome in order to make legislation work. It is these same policy and decision makers that have expressed that the NTNs gave them the solutions to tackle the obstacles. What is a crucial lesson in this regard is that in order to attract the attention of relevant actors something new should be offered to them instead of repeating the same old message in a different way.

Inflexible working methods

The worst that can happen to an NTN is being inflexible and non-responsive to changes in the wider external context. The NTNs which have been successful have all responded in a flexible way when unexpected things have happened. Space should be left to alter original objectives whenever this is necessary to be able to respond effectively to the policy agenda. The same counts for effectively responding to projects which changed direction during the process. The NTNs have responded to this need for flexibility by including, for example, external experts which gave direction to the NTN's content. The members benefit greatly from expert inputs on all aspects related to the NTN's activities.

Giving up!

The biggest challenge all NTNs had to face was the constant discussing, sharing, meeting and negotiating that took place in order to get policy actors mobilised to come on board and keep them on board. The NTNs grew over time into useful platforms for projects to understand how to develop long term and good approaches through continuous policy involvement and progress sharing. But the way can be long and very difficult at times and then success lies in not giving up and keeping the members involved. In the end, the devotion to the NTN is based for an important part on the free will of its members.

4. ANNEX

Austria	One Adaptability NTN focusing on the "optimisation of supply and demand for further education possibilities"
Belgium (FR + DE)	One Adaptability NTN focusing on the "employment of older workers"
Belgium (NL)	No specific NTN on Adaptability, but the adaptability project joined the Entrepreneurship NTN
Czech Republic	One Adaptability NTN focusing on adaptability as a broad theme
Denmark	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "companies and diversity"
Finland	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "supporting firms and their workers in adapting to structural change in the economy, and facilitating the adaptation of IT and other new technology"
France	One Adaptability NTN focusing on the "adaptability of individuals and organisations"
Germany	Two Adaptability NTNs: one focusing on "older people (45+)", and the other on "lifelong learning" (which in turn set up 2 sub-groups on SMEs and individuals)
Greece	One Adaptability NTN focusing on the "validation of skills and competencies"
Ireland	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "lifelong learning and inclusive work practices"
Italy	The Adaptability NTN did not carry out its planned activities following a ministerial change in 2002
Luxembourg	No NTN
Netherlands	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "the link between education and work, and ICT for disadvantaged groups"
Portugal	One Adaptability NTN which focused on 3 main themes: on-the-job training, lifelong learning and skills certification
Spain	One NTN focusing on "business creation and adaptability" with a specific subgroup on adaptability
Sweden	One Adaptability NTN focusing on "the promotion of learning environments and informal learning"
UK- GB	Two Adaptability NTNs: one on "promoting lifelong learning and inclusive work practices" and the other on "supporting the adaptability of firms and employees"
UK - NI	No NTN