

## RESTRUCTURING – USEFUL EXAMPLES FROM THE EQUAL ASYLUM SEEKERS THEME

### 1. INTRODUCTION

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The issue of restructuring is high on the EU agenda. It is not a new concept or phenomenon, as companies have always needed to adapt to the challenge of having to operate in a dynamic and fast changing economic and social environment. In order for businesses to survive, they have to anticipate and manage changes that lie ahead. Restructuring is therefore an essential element of the Lisbon Agenda, and several EU policy documents, such as the Communication on “European Values in the Globalised World” (2005) and “Restructuring and employment: Anticipating and accompanying restructuring in order to develop employment: the role of the European Union” draw attention to the need to address the phenomenon by joining forces rather than having each Member State developing its own national approach.

The EQUAL Community Initiative, funded through the European Social Fund and national co-financing, has provided the opportunity to testing innovative approaches to managing restructuring from both an economic and social viewpoint. EQUAL’s overall focus on disadvantaged groups and promoting social inclusion in the labour market makes the programme well placed to provide insights and good practices in the field of proactive and socially responsible change management. The lessons emerging from EQUAL will undoubtedly inform the current EU Restructuring debate.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the extent to which the lessons and good practices from a particular theme within EQUAL, namely the Socio-vocational Integration of Asylum Seekers, could be used to feed into the discussions on Restructuring. In particular, the paper will present some specific approaches, tools and instruments that may be useful for the upcoming session of the Restructuring Forum<sup>1</sup> December 2006.

### 2. THE EQUAL ASYLUM SEEKER THEME – SOME SPECIFIC FEATURES

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Prior to describing the interesting practices of the EQUAL Asylum Seekers theme that could inform the debate on Restructuring, it is important to highlight a few of the very specific features of the theme.

First, the EQUAL Asylum Seekers theme, as opposed to the other themes within the Community Initiative, is focused on a single target group only, namely persons who have applied for asylum in a certain Member State. Asylum is “*a form of protection given by a State on its territory based on the principle of ‘non-refoulement’ and internationally or nationally recognised refugee rights. It is granted to a person who is unable to seek protection in its country of citizenship and/or residence, in particular for fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion*”<sup>2</sup>

Persons seeking asylum are therefore waiting for a decision to be taken on their application, i.e. whether they will be recognised refugee rights or whether they will not be granted a status and need to return to their country of origin. This waiting period can range from a few weeks to many years. Asylum seekers do not have the same rights as other citizens or residents in the EU. In

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<sup>1</sup> The Restructuring Forum was established by the European Commission in 2005. For more information, see [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/restructuring/forum\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/restructuring/forum_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Glossary on DG Justice, Freedom and Security website.

fact, their rights vary greatly from Member State to Member State. In most EU countries, for example, asylum seekers are not allowed to work or face restrictions which limit their access to the labour market. Such restrictions include work permits limited to a certain job or to a certain period of time, or other requirements (i.e. a waiting period of anywhere between three months to a year, before access to employment is granted). The EU Directive on reception conditions for asylum seekers (adopted in February 2003) has some scope to improve national policies on asylum seekers' access to training and employment. The Directive was to be transposed into national law and implemented by Member State governments by February 2005. Article 11 of this Directive states that Member States should determine a period of time, which should not go beyond 12 months, after which asylum seekers have access to the labour market. Article 12 states that Member States may provide access to vocational training. Despite the February 2005 deadline, a number of Member States have not yet transposed this Directive or have transposed it only partially.

Second, although asylum seekers can certainly be considered a disadvantaged group, they are not explicitly mentioned in any of the European Commission's policy papers and other initiatives in the context of Employment and Social Affairs (e.g. the European Employment Strategy and the Social Inclusion Process). In fact, it will be a major challenge to ensure that in the future, after EQUAL, sufficient focus will be placed on the integration of asylum seekers. Whilst asylum is a policy area within Justice, Freedom and Security, policy developments and initiatives undertaken within this field place a high focus on their reception and return, but less on their social and vocational integration while they are waiting for a decision on their asylum application.

Despite these specific and often limiting, features, or perhaps even because of them, the approaches to the integration of asylum seekers developed under the EQUAL Asylum Seekers theme have been highly innovative and often very successful. A number of practices put in place for asylum seekers can be easily transferred to other contexts or to other target groups and some could certainly be relevant to the Restructuring theme.

### **3. USEFUL PRACTICES FROM THE EQUAL ASYLUM SEEKERS THEME**

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Which of the actions undertaken by the EQUAL partnerships in the Asylum Seekers theme could be relevant to Restructuring? What are the parallels between dealing with asylum seekers and supporting people who are faced by mass dismissals?

When looking at the target group, Asylum Seekers Development Partnerships deal with a highly heterogeneous group of persons, not only in terms of nationality, but also in terms of age, background, culture and competences. Also in restructuring cases, when for example an entire company is ceasing its activities or when a whole region is experiencing a decline within a sector, the challenge of dealing with a heterogeneous group of people occurs. Further, it is often very stigmatising to be dismissed and potential new employers may be reluctant to hire them because of ignorance; a challenge that asylum seekers certainly have in common with dismissed people.

Because of these parallels, three approaches from the asylum seekers theme are of great relevance in a restructuring context:

- Building relations with employers,
- Identifying and promoting the skills of a heterogeneous group of people in the search for education, training and employment opportunities,.
- Building systems to “match” the profile of clients with the demand for jobs.

These are further elaborated below.

### 3.1. BUILDING RELATIONS WITH EMPLOYERS

#### Approaches and good practices

A key element for increasing asylum seekers' employment prospects is the development of good relations with potential public and private employers. Very often employers are hesitant to offer jobs to asylum seekers as they are afraid of a too heavy administrative burden while dealing with this group. Even more frequently employers are not even aware of the benefits asylum seekers can bring to their organisation.

EQUAL partnerships applied a wide range of approaches to engage employers. The vast majority of Round 1 projects indicated that they used some form of mediation, which usually consisted of individuals approaching employers directly, providing the latter with information on the Development Partnership and convincing them to participate. Such a face-to-face method has been very successful, especially when undertaken by persons employers perceive to be "credible. One partnership for example used retired managements as mediators, who were able to make use of their old networks to identify internships.

Other approaches often taken include lobbying, campaigning and networking. Some EQUAL partnerships experimented with more formal approaches, such as signing agreements with employers or organisations representing employers, committing them to hiring a certain number of asylum seekers or to ensure their placement in companies.

*The Spanish partnership **ENEAS-EQUAL** has established collaboration agreements with different local and regional organisations and institutions (public and private) with the objective to facilitate the access of asylum seekers to the labour market. One collaboration agreement which was set up in Madrid involved the Spanish Federation for Hotels and Restaurants (FEHR), the Spanish Commission for Help to Refugees (CEAR, partner in ENEAS) and the EQUAL development partnership. The partners agreed to develop training activities with a vocational focus in the hotel and restaurant sector and assist asylum seekers in finding employment. By participating in the training programme, asylum seekers obtain a Spanish qualification which would be useful for future work within the hotel and restaurant sector. The collaboration agreements were very important to establish a dialogue between the different actors. All parties involved have expressed how positive and successful they thought the collaboration has been and wished to make it permanent. The partnership is continuing its activities under Round 2.*

Increasingly, EQUAL partnerships place emphasis on Corporate Social Responsibility and Diversity Management to convince employers. Earlier surveys as well as discussions during a recent workshop in Greece on the challenges of finding employment for asylum seekers have shown that these themes act as an incentive for companies, especially those with a higher than average interest in intercultural understanding and equality. Development Partnerships also used events, such as conferences, information sessions but also cultural activities to raise awareness on asylum and to attract employers.

*The **Becoming Visible** partnership in Finland helped asylum seekers find employment by contacting employers to encourage them to take part in study visits and offer practical work placements to asylum seekers. This allowed over 100 asylum seekers to participate in such placements. One example included on-the-job training in a cleaning company which led to jobs for some. The DP also organised an employment fair where asylum seekers had the chance to meet employers and learn about job openings. This also allowed employers to meet and interview potential new employees. This activity was especially effective in regions where there is a need for seasonal workers. The activities of the partnership are continuing under Round 2 under a new name: **Becoming More Visible**.*

#### Key lessons:

The different approaches taken to building relations with employers are certainly useful for regions and companies dealing with Restructuring. Notwithstanding the approach chosen however, it is important to take into account that developing good relations is a time-consuming process, which requires a thorough knowledge of the target group one is working with, as well as

of the spectrum of potential employers and employer organisations. Important factors to ensure successful relations are:

- Using mediators which are “credible” in the eyes of employers
- Applying marketing techniques to promote the potential of the target group
- Preparing a convincing profile (e.g. based on a skills assessment) of each client
- Managing expectations – being very realistic as to the type of job, requirements, conditions, etc.
- Offering to relieve companies of part of the administrative burden to hiring asylum seekers
- Formalising agreements with employers and employer organisations

## 3.2. SKILLS AUDITS

### Approaches and good practices

When asylum seekers arrive in the EU, the recognition of their individual skills and qualifications is of major importance for their socio-vocational integration in the host country, both in terms of accessing suitable education and training and finding relevant work opportunities. This process is, however, often not straightforward, as many asylum seekers have non-formal skills or are unable to provide certificates or proof of studies or employment. In the light of this, several EQUAL Partnerships in the Asylum Seekers theme of EQUAL have developed, tested and applied new methods and tools to recognise, value and assess the skills and abilities of asylum seekers, often building on self-assessment by the asylum seeker together with a coach.

Under Round 1 of EQUAL, a Working Group on skills audits was created within the Asylum Seekers theme to share experiences and draw lessons from the different approaches to skills audits that were being developed and carried out by EQUAL Partnerships in various Member States. From their work, it was clear that in a high number of cases, the audits resulted in asylum seekers being able to access relevant training, volunteering, on-the-job training opportunities or employment. This is of great benefit to the host society, both through contributions to the economy and in terms of reducing the costs of inactivity and alienation of asylum seekers. It was also found that the application of skills audits improved the self-esteem and motivation of asylum seekers. In addition to compiling a CD with information about each of the individual approaches, the group also contributed to a guide outlining general steps for applying skills audits to asylum seekers: 'Skills Audits – The Basics: Working with Asylum Seekers', and created a brochure for an EQUAL European conference that took place in Dublin in 2004: 'Asylum Seekers in the EU: the Challenges of Integration'.

In brief, the Partnerships found that eight general steps formed part of all their approaches to undertaking a skills audit. Firstly, potential candidates are **informed** (step 1) about the possibility to undergo a skills audit, including general information on how the audit will be undertaken and what its benefits are in terms of accessing suitable work and education. Secondly, there is a **selection** of participants, however, no one is forced to participate, but the skills audit is undertaken on a voluntary basis (step 2). Once participants have been identified, there is an **initial interview** (step 3) when the programme is explained in detail and the asylum seekers' motivations to participate are investigated. The next stage is to **identify** (step 4) 'soft' and 'hard' **skills** / qualifications / competencies / work experiences / language comprehension by using a variety of tools e.g. questionnaires, recording, interviews, digital portfolio and integrated skills audits. Several meetings with the participant are required in order to give the individual time to reflect on what has been said and add to what has previously been said. The requirements for obtaining a certain degree or professional qualification vary between countries and so **validation** (step 5) of the certificates is usually necessary. How and when this validation takes place is dependent upon the national system. The **results** of the skills audit are usually **presented** (step 6) in a CV or portfolio which is given to the participants. Following the skills audit, an individualised programme/**action plan** is agreed upon that outlines future options/opportunities

(step 7). The evaluation of the cost effectiveness of undertaking skills audits is made in the follow-up (step 8).

One of the Partnerships that created a successful skills audit approach in Round 1 of EQUAL was the British EQUAL Partnership ASSET UK:

*Under Round 1 of EQUAL, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), one of the partners of the EQUAL Partnership **ASSET UK**, developed and implemented a skills audit instrument. The skills audits looked at the skills and qualifications of asylum seekers living in the East Midlands in order to determine the potential contribution they could make to their local community, and was undertaken with almost 1,000 asylum seekers. Results showed that a high number of asylum seekers have qualifications ranging from basic schooling to higher degrees, including vocational and professional qualifications. Many had employment experience before coming to the UK, and the majority of those surveyed spoke more than one language.*

### **Key lessons:**

As concerns the recognition of skills and qualifications, there is an important parallel to the Restructuring theme. Many employees, who have been working in the same company for a certain number of years and need to change direction of work because the company shuts down or moves its activities, have difficulties to realise all competences and skills they have acquired during their working time and go beyond the mere title of their work. By, for example, undertaking a self-assessment of his or her competences, together with a coach, the employee (or unemployed) has better prospects to acknowledge what valuable experiences have been gained through the different tasks that were part of the job. Therefore, a “skills audit” or “competence analysis” is a key tool also for this group of people for further job search or accessing suitable training or education.

An assessment also has clear benefits in terms of improving the participant’s self-esteem. Many individuals who have or are in risk of losing their job and / or need to change work direction start questioning their value on the job market and in some cases also more generally. Through self-reflection and other “auditing” activities together with a coach, the person who undertakes a skills audit gain insights into all valuable knowledge he or she possesses, which has been shown to empower the individual tremendously and boost their self-esteem.

The main benefits of undertaking a skills audit are:

- They ensure that the attributes and competences of asylum seekers / employees (or unemployed) in search of (new) work are not lost to the Member State in which they currently live.
- They improve the self-esteem and self-reliance of the person undergoing the skills audit.
- They ensure that best use is made of available advice, education, training and opportunities for work.
- Skills audits help employers to recognise the potential and needs of asylum seekers / employees / unemployed.

Important factors to ensure the success of skills audits are:

- Information provision to the individual about the content of the skills audit and its benefits.
- Voluntary participation – the individual must agree to undergo the skills audit, no one should be forced to participate.
- The skills audit should comprise questions and self-reflection not only on qualifications, education and work that has resulted in certificates / diplomas, but also investigate other relevant experiences of the participant that could be useful for work

opportunities or setting up one's own business, e.g. hobbies such as sports trainer, sewing, gardening etc.

- Several meetings with the participant are required in order to give the individual time to reflect on what has been said and add to what has previously been said.
- The results of the skills audit should be presented in a portfolio and / or CV which the individual has exclusive ownership over.
- The skills audit should always be looked at as a means forward and never constitute a goal in itself. An action plan should therefore always be the result of the analysis.

### 3.3. DATABASES AND TOOLS TO MATCH SUPPLY WITH DEMAND

#### Approaches and good practices

In order to ensure that the right job or work experiences are being found for the asylum seekers Development Partnerships have been working with, special efforts were placed on the “matching” process. This process carefully looks at the skills and competences, as well as the interests, of the asylum seekers who are trying to access employment and cross-check these against the types of jobs, in terms of requirements and expectations, which are being offered by public or private employers.

EQUAL partnerships have created and are developing innovative ways to match the demand and the supply of Asylum seekers on the labour market. In a few cases, specific databases and other systems are developed to store and match the electronic profiles of asylum seekers (their main skills, qualifications and interests) with job adverts of companies. This system allows, by entering of a few simple parameters, to find the best candidate for the job opening and puts the future employee and employer in direct contact. These matching tools are often available online to ensure access by multiple users and to facilitate communication between them.

**ANADRASI-ISTOS** in Greece created an interactive electronic network, connecting actors who provide services to asylum seekers via a common online database, “ESTIA”. Through a simple “click”, agencies can refer the asylum seekers to each other in order to give them effective specialised assistance. The introduction of the interactive system means that the asylum seeker’s personal information is only recorded once, electronically, at the first agency the asylum seeker goes to. The other organisations, linked to the database, can then access this information by simply entering the name of the asylum seeker or the number connected to their record. It is a very user-friendly tool, which does not allow the “user”, i.e. the person registering the data, to move on to the next section without filling in the required information. This information is essential because the database also serves as a tool for those agencies helping asylum seekers to find employment. Within the main network, which links different actors such as legal experts, reception centres and the Red Cross there is a smaller network of agencies specialising in employment. The partnership is still very active in Round 2

Other matching systems used were simpler and more focused on specific sectoral or vocational areas. The EQUAL partnerships first identified areas with a labour shortage and subsequently selected asylum seekers with a suitable profile to match the needs of companies.

**The Bridges Project** is a work-shadowing scheme operated in Glasgow by the ATLAS DP in both Round 1 and 2 of EQUAL. The aim of the project is to break down negative barriers between the asylum seeker community and employers and help asylum seekers to gain professional experience. Scotland is in a unique position in the UK because it is experiencing a skills shortage, its population is ageing rapidly and it has a low birth-rate. Also, approximately 65% of asylum seekers in Glasgow are educated to degree level or above and have a wide range of skills.

The work-shadowing scheme is open to all asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. Participants need to have a reasonable standard of English to participate. The work-shadowing placements are in the following fields: medicine, teaching, building/engineering, administration, legal and financial, amongst others. The Partnership sends tailored letters to potential employers explaining the work-shadowing scheme. Word of mouth seems to work very

*well, especially in the public sector. Once a few employers decided to participate, this had a domino effect with many others wanting to take part.*

*When an asylum seeker contacts the Project, an informal meeting is set up to discuss their skills and qualifications, previous work experience, and expectations. A database has been set up with information on participants' occupational qualifications, the number of years of experience, etc. which is used to match candidates with employers. Placements usually run for 12 weeks with a minimum participation of one day a week. The project is examining ways to give asylum seekers who complete a work-shadowing placement formal accreditation should they wish to undertake formal study or to demonstrate to future employers that they have work experience.*

*Through the work-shadowing experience, participants have the opportunity to learn about local work habits and cultural differences and gain valuable professional experience, which prepares them for future employment. All but one of the employers who offered a placement to an asylum seeker through the Bridges Project have been willing to repeat the process and take on more placements. After gaining refugee status, some participants have found employment as a result of having taken part in the work-shadowing scheme and sometimes with the employers with whom they have shadowed.*

**Key lessons:**

The use of databases, either online or managed by an organisation, to match people in search of employment with job opportunities that fit their potential and interest, is certainly relevant for Restructuring. Important factors to ensure the success of such matching tools are:

- When approaching employers, information on the individuals that are being put forward for a job has to be clear and detailed.
- It is useful to undertake a pre-selection of individuals on the basis of their profile and interests before proposing them to companies.
- Databases, especially when online, need to be user-friendly and easy to search.
- Matches need to be realistic: it is de-motivating for a highly-skilled individual to only receive low-skilled job placements, or for those with an interest in electronics to be placed in the agricultural sector.