

LEARNING HOW TO BUILD CAPACITY: SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES FROM ROUND 1

EQUAL ASYLUM SEEKERS

WHAT IS CAPACITY BUILDING?

Capacity building covers a wide range of issues, including actions to strengthen and further develop human resources, infrastructures or organisational arrangements within a community or organisation. It can also cover the development of institutional, financial, political and other resources at different levels and in different sectors of society. Successful capacity building lays a solid basis for more effective and efficient services and activities. It strongly supports the development of knowledge and understanding.

Within EQUAL, building capacity is about improving the quality of the Development Partnerships, and developing the resources and infrastructures used by these partnerships. As EQUAL deals with specific disadvantaged groups, it also includes making the wider public aware that some people face more difficulties or challenges than others to find a job or to learn something new. In the Asylum Seekers theme, capacity building more specifically means training the people that work with asylum seekers to help them understand their situation and needs, setting up networks of local, regional and national partners and creating the tools for this networking, and raising awareness of what it means to be an asylum seeker.

When looking at Round 2 of EQUAL, nearly 85% of the new partnerships plan to increase the capacity of their organisation and raise public awareness about the needs and potential of asylum seekers. This focus is even stronger in the New Member States and represents a positive continuation of Round 1 learning. In the first Round of EQUAL the majority of asylum seeker Development Partnerships were working on some form of capacity building. This not only helped projects to build solid and lasting partnerships but also, more importantly, to improve and expand their support to asylum seekers.

But why is capacity building so important for Asylum Seeker partnerships? Helping asylum seekers to integrate is not possible without making the people working with this disadvantaged group understand what it means to seek asylum in their country. The procedures for requesting refugee status are often very complicated, and in many Member States asylum seekers do not have the same rights as EU citizens. Their integration also requires improving the quality of services and support available to them, as well as changing the sometimes negative perception of the community they live in. Capacity building is therefore at the root of each direct action for asylum seekers, be it their reception, orientation, counselling, education and training, or access to the labour market.

It is important to build on the lessons learnt so far in EQUAL. This paper seeks to collect some of the most interesting approaches developed under Round 1 which truly helped to strengthen human resources and organisational practices, and which led to better relations with the wider community. It is hoped that, by looking closer at how things worked out for some of the "old" EQUAL partnerships, projects active in Round 2 will feel inspired to make their efforts to build capacity even more successful. The paper will be especially useful for EQUAL partnerships in the New Member States, as they are first time participants in the Asylum Seeker theme. Many of these countries make up the new external borders of the European Union and may also, in the near future, have to deal with increases in the numbers of people seeking asylum.

WHAT WORKED IN ROUND 1?

Here are some practical stories of what EQUAL partnerships managed to achieve in the first Round. Of course each of the examples has its specific features and characteristics as they were conceived and developed within a particular national context or culture. But they are all based on simple, straightforward ideas which could easily be adapted to other situations.

The first examples concern actions aimed at helping people working with asylum seekers to gain a better understanding of how to best deal with this particular client group. Secondly, there are examples of projects that built partnerships that successfully joined forces to improve the situation in which asylum seekers live. The final examples tell how some EQUAL partnerships managed to reach out and change public opinion, or succeed in making local communities more welcoming to the newly arrived.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE HELPS!

Working with asylum seekers is not always easy. It requires empathy and mental strength combined with a thorough knowledge and understanding of the specific conditions and needs of this particularly disadvantaged group.

Around one quarter of the EQUAL partnerships in Round 1 organised training and other learning opportunities for staff working with asylum seekers. This included outreach workers, staff in reception centres, but also officials working in migration services. Different approaches were used to teach people, ranging from training sessions and discussion groups to workshops and lectures. The themes taught also varied from explanations on the asylum process and the services available to asylum seekers to counselling and conflict resolution. Some particularly interesting practices are explained here.

The Irish partnership **SONAS** hired and trained four outreach workers who could provide direct support to asylum seekers and act as 'links' to support services and public authorities. In order to become outreach workers, trainees had to follow a range of short-term sessions which comprised experiential learning, group discussions, case studies, role play and theoretical inputs, to best prepare them for their future tasks. Reaching out meant in the case of SONAS that the workers were constantly travelling and visiting reception and accommodation centres, and other organisations such as health services, to help asylum seekers find their way in the new society.

During the two years the project ran, SONAS outreach workers assisted 1,194 asylum seekers by providing them with information on the asylum procedure and important legislative changes, their rights and entitlements, welfare provisions, as well as other useful information, such as opportunities for voluntary work. Another important aspect of outreach workers' work was to explain public attitudes to asylum seekers and vice versa, acting as a cultural bridge between them and the service providers they came in contact with. In this way, they were able to tackle misconceptions and raise awareness in the host community

People working with asylum seekers have to be prepared to deal with severely traumatised persons, people waiting anxiously for a decision – which sometimes takes years to arrive - and persons who have to deal with negative, life-changing news in case their application is rejected. It is not a job that can be done by anyone, as it requires good communication skills and the ability to enter a relationship of trust with the client. Many EQUAL partnerships therefore not only offered training to their employees, they also used specific methods to select new staff.

Don't Wait in Austria developed an interesting approach to make sure that project workers were fit and ready to work with asylum seekers. First, staff went through a thorough skills assessment which not only looked at their formal education and training, but also at their previous work experience. It was in fact important for the EQUAL partnership to employ staff who already had the "right" soft skills to work with asylum seekers and develop a trustful relationship with them, such as people who have worked in the social sector, or for NGOs. Once Don't Wait was sure that it had hired a good project team, it started working on their "hard" skills, including courses on the labour market and other more technical services.

But project workers are not the only ones who have to provide good services to people in need of support. Several EQUAL partnerships also tried to change the attitudes of other actors dealing with asylum seekers, such as civil servants processing their applications, or physicians examining them. Making people aware of the special situation of asylum seekers helped to improve the quality of their services.

INTEG.R.A in Italy developed a training programme for core administrative staff in local and regional authorities. Since the process for applying for asylum has been decentralised, civil servants with little previous experience had to not only learn how such procedures worked, but also how to deal with a new client group. The courses set up by the Italian partnership helped them to understand the specific conditions of asylum seekers and to improve their services. They were also better able to refer asylum seekers to other information and support structures.

The German partnership **SPUK** invited civil servants to give lectures to asylum seekers. While the primary goal of these sessions was of course to give information to asylum seekers on the application process, their rights and obligations, etc., the meetings had an important additional goal. The lectures helped to create a real dialogue between the group of asylum seekers and the lecturer. Through this direct personal contact, civil servants became much “closer” to their client group than they would normally do, which in most cases led to better understanding and empathy.

PARTNERSHIP AND NETWORKING THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Partnership building and networking means getting the right actors on board and creating an efficient and competent team of people with the same vision. Good communication and cooperation are essential ingredients for creating partnerships that last. The EQUAL partnerships set up many different forms of “joint ventures”. Some partnerships were of a strategic nature, and included high-level agencies such as migration boards and public employment services. Others had a strong operational focus, involving organisations providing services to asylum seekers directly, such as reception centres and training organisations.

Capacity building in the first Round of EQUAL was particularly successful where the services and facilities available to newcomers were insufficient or scattered. The Development Partnerships managed to “map” and link local and national actors with agencies responsible for migration and asylum, creating networks which were built to last. This networking also provided a way to “match” asylum seekers to training and employment opportunities available to them, especially in Member States which place legal restrictions or specific conditions on accessing these.

Building new and sustainable partners at all levels of society was a core success of **INTEG.R.A** (Italy). The EQUAL partnership organised two national and seven local Steering Groups (called “local integration tables”) made up of public authorities, NGOs, healthcare and social services and other relevant organisations. The Steering Groups worked on the basis of a precise distribution of tasks and responsibilities, and with clear guidelines for communication and information sharing. The structure of the groups created new synergies, but especially added a new dynamic to networking. The “local integration tables” acted as territorial pacts to improve the social and economic situation of asylum seekers and to improve the quality of services and structures available to them. The national Steering Groups acted as coordinator of the local initiatives. They made sure that the local tables followed a common vision, and, more importantly, that the lessons emerging from the ground could be used to inform national policies and practices. **INTEG.R.A** helped to create a strong network, which continues to exist even outside the framework of EQUAL.

Another interesting element of the Asylum Seekers theme was that many of the partnerships and networks also looked at ways to make their linkages even more effective. They developed some quite innovative tools to facilitate communication and link partners. These online platforms and databases were also, in a few cases, used to “match” asylum seekers with relevant services, education and training opportunities, and sometimes even job openings.

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.

Other EQUAL partnerships created sophisticated websites offering information to asylum seekers on where to go for education, legal advice or social and psychological support.

ASSET UK partners have explored innovative ways of reaching out to asylum seekers no matter where they are and providing them with the information they need through the use of IT tools specially developed and designed with their needs in mind. The ‘Information for Asylum Seekers’ website (www.info-for-asylumseekers.org.uk) developed by RAGU, an Asset UK partner, is a user-friendly resource which provides asylum seekers with detailed and up-to-date on-line information which they are sure to find useful when exploring educational and volunteering opportunities in the UK, as well as other information. From the homepage, users can choose between seven colour-coded headings which guide them to information on improving their English, understanding the UK education system, getting into further or higher education, how to volunteer, how to prepare for the job market, how to get qualifications and experience recognised, and how to go through the process of re-qualification (for regulated professions such as doctors or architects, etc.). Translated summaries in eight of the most common languages spoken by asylum seekers in the UK are provided for those who do not have a sufficient level of English.

Spreading the word - raising awareness

The social and vocational integration of asylum seekers is not possible without a society welcoming their (often only temporary) integration. EQUAL partnerships worked hard on making the wider public aware of the needs of asylum seekers, and the often difficult conditions in which they lived. But the projects also fought against the notion that asylum seekers were helpless victims, and instead, showed how with a bit of support they had a huge potential to become valuable contributors to their new community.

Awareness-raising was organised in many different ways. Formal approaches included, for example, the development of targeted “marketing” campaigns to inform employers about the benefits of offering asylum seekers employment. Other EQUAL partnerships organised press conferences, or produced short documentaries showing the enthusiasm of young asylum seekers to “fit in” and create a new life in their host society.

EPIMA in Austria helped young asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minors, to learn German in combination with vocational training and practical work experiences. One of the top priorities of the partnership was to show the wider community the enthusiasm and determination of their group of youngsters. EPIMA developed a DVD which followed their pupils throughout the project: attending different courses, finding their way on the Internet, socialising with new friends, their first work experiences and taking part in many other activities. The DVD was very personal, showing the hopes and ambitions of a small group of young adults who may not be able to stay in Austria. The stories they tell on the DVD certainly touched people, and made them understand what it means to be young and alone in a society often completely different from their home country.

Informal, more “playful” approaches aimed to increase the visibility of asylum seekers as active members of the community include sport events, theatre plays, open-door days and other activities combining leisure with information.

In the north of Europe, the Finnish partnership **BECOMING VISIBLE** has succeeded in making asylum seekers recognised in their new society. It organised a range of smart promotional activities to bring attention to their plight and to create contacts with the wider community. Becoming Visible considered that the best way for achieving this was through culture. The project organised several interesting events such as a travelling photo exhibition which toured three cities, a fashion show, a football match, and participation in a well-attended concert organised by an anti-racism network. Media interest was overwhelmingly positive and caused a snowball effect of additional initiatives. But the real victory of Becoming Visible was that it put Finns in direct contact with asylum seekers, making them feel welcomed and accepted.

But it wasn't just the big campaigns that helped to make the case for asylum seeker integration. A few smaller initiatives, sometimes not even specifically aiming to raise awareness, also acted as real “eye-openers” to the local community.

In Sweden, **ARRIVAL GOTEBOURG**, wanted to build on and strengthen the links of asylum seekers with the host country. They organised thematic courses on Swedish culture and society, and explained the wider asylum and migration context of the European Union. The courses were combined with study visits to some of the main companies and cultural institutions in the Gothenburg area, and theme days involving municipalities, the Migration Board and representatives of other institutions. The direct contacts established through these visits and events made Swedish officials and “normal” citizens understand much more what it meant to be seeking asylum and living in uncertainty.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

What can be learnt from the above success stories? What should new EQUAL partnerships do, or not do, when trying to improve their capacity and reach the wider public? Some suggestions to keep in mind are presented here.

Training those working with asylum seekers is almost compulsory in order to improve the quality of services and facilities. Staff and other persons in contact with asylum seekers need to understand the particular needs and expectations of asylum seekers. Project workers also need to be well-informed of their clients' rights and obligations, in order not to misinform and confuse them. Time and time again EQUAL has shown that good operators can help asylum seekers to make these few small steps, moving them out of isolation and straight into society.

Training works best when it is adapted to a particular national context and tailored to the role and tasks of the persons participating in the courses. Development partnerships that placed a high emphasis on both the “hard” and the “soft” skills of their workers enabled them to deliver better services. The “softer” skills are important for practitioners to develop good relations with their clients, while the more technical skills give people the right background knowledge to provide reliable information.

Networking and partnership building make agencies more effective and more efficient. Clear cooperation schemes help organisations to “map” what is available to asylum seekers already, and spot gaps and duplication of efforts. EQUAL can bring different partners, with sometimes completely different views and opinions, for the first time around the same table to pursue a common goal and vision. These new forms of collaborations served as “cement” – making a solid structure out of a previously scattered and loose group of actors. Creating networks that last is not an easy task, but any efforts made will certainly pay off.

In order to make networking a success, tools such as databases, online platforms and websites can make the difference between chaos and a well-run organisation. Matching tools have made it much easier and faster to find the right education or work opportunities for asylum seekers. Connecting organisations online also minimises the time necessary to register asylum seekers, as this now only needs to be done once instead of repeatedly by every single partner. Information

sources such as websites offer asylum seekers an easy and complete overview of their rights, obligations, available services and learning or work opportunities. Any electronic tool is most useful when it connects as many relevant actors as possible.

Raising public awareness is tricky but essential to help asylum seekers integrate. Any activity in this regard should be able to really attract the attention of people, tearing them away from what they were doing and making them pay serious attention. The combination of culture and awareness-raising has proved to be very successful - concerts, exhibitions and sports have the power to open eyes and change attitudes. Placing asylum seekers in direct contact with the local community is a key to success.

“Higher level” political awareness-raising often requires a more formal approach, for example through conferences, press events and the publication of good printed material. Projects should have a good, credible story to tell, backed up with concrete and tangible figures and facts. Policy and decision makers will be interested in the “value for money” question – does it pay off to help asylum seekers integrate? It is important that EQUAL partnerships prepare for these questions and come back with responses that leave no doubts.