

MAKING ASYLUM SEEKERS MORE VISIBLE

In 2003, there were 3221 persons who applied for asylum in Finland, of whom 7 were granted refugee status. Since November 2002, asylum seekers in Finland are allowed to work three months after arriving in the country. However, finding a job is difficult without a good knowledge of Finnish. Also, in a homogeneous society like Finland, discrimination is common, especially in the labour market. It can take several months or even years until asylum seekers receive a decision on their asylum applications. This could be a long time spent waiting without having any kind of active occupation.

In a first phase, four reception centres for asylum seekers located in different parts of Finland have participated in the Becoming Visible Development Partnership (DP) which has worked in collaboration with the Finnish Association of Adult Education Centres (KTOL).

This DP has provided asylum seekers with different learning and employment opportunities, such as language and vocational training aiming to help them become self-sufficient during their stay in Finland. Another objective was to test and share different training tools and approaches. An important part of the DP's work has been to fight racism and promote multiculturalism by educating the public about the problems faced by asylum seekers and increasing their visibility and acceptance in the local community.



A concert organised by Becoming Visible to fight racism

The DP has now started the second phase of activity with a slightly revised name, which expresses the partners' commitment to build on what has been achieved so far: Becoming More Visible. New partners have since joined after learning about the excellent results of the first round of activities and the partnership is now administered by the Finnish Red Cross.

Päivi Sinkkonen, project coordinator at the Tampere Reception Centre explains: "Asylum seekers are not the only target group of the DP. There is also a need to challenge attitudes and educate the Finnish public as well as the media, who are often misinformed about asylum seekers."

PROMOTING VISIBILITY AND COMBATING EXCLUSION

Becoming Visible has helped asylum seekers make the most of the time they spend in Finland while waiting for a decision on their asylum applications. Thanks to the project, over 1000 asylum seekers were able to take Finnish classes and other useful courses, such as computer training, metal and woodwork and handicrafts. Practical courses providing an introduction to Finnish culture and society and life management skills were also organised. The DP also designed special courses to address the specific needs of women and young asylum seekers.

An important part of the DP's work has been helping asylum seekers find employment. Contacts were made with employers in order to organise study visits and practical work placements. Over 100 asylum seekers were able 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 owner of a greenhouse in the Finnish countryside where vegetables are grown described her experiences of employing asylum seekers for seasonal work: "In my opinion, the work experience has been positive for most of the asylum seekers we've hired. Their language skills and self-confidence have improved, as has their understanding of Finnish society."

Another obstacle to finding work is that employers are often unsure of the legal and administrative procedures necessary to hire asylum seekers. To address this, the DP contacted employers and provided information to both parties on labour law and workers' rights and duties. They were also able to assist with contacts with trade unions, tax and employment offices, as well as other authorities.



Happy to have found work and preparing for a better future

John¹ is from East Africa and has been living in Finland as an asylum seeker for the past four years. He describes his experience: "My aim was to be able to live independently. The staff of the Becoming Visible DP helped me to reach my goal. They knew I was eager to study and they helped me find information on academic courses I could apply to. I'm now in my last year of a three-year nursing course. After four years in Finland, I'm still waiting for a decision on my asylum application but I have been able to make good use of my time here."

Asylum seekers are not the only beneficiaries of the project. The DP also aims to develop the professional skills of reception centre staff and educate the local community. Training has been provided for staff on topics such as: the principles of teaching and learning, using pedagogical tools, group coordination and facilitation, the use of drama techniques and multicultural communication.

The DP has succeeded in making asylum seekers 'more visible' by organising activities which bring attention to their plight and create contacts with wider society. Such activities have included the organisation of 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. Through such events, the DP has been able to involve the local community and put Finns in contact with asylum seekers, while attracting a lot of media interest. It is hoped that in the long run such awareness-raising activities will make it easier for asylum seekers to be accepted in Finnish society and eventually find jobs.

TRANSNATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO LOCAL PROBLEMS

The Becoming Visible DP has been part of a transnational consortium (called Integration and Visibility Through Action for Training and Learning) along with other EQUAL DPs working with asylum seekers in Finland, Scotland and Denmark. Through this transnational cooperation, partners have been able to share their knowledge, experience and expertise, and apply the lessons they have learnt in different contexts.

The consortium set up thematic workgroups on specific topics (i.e. evaluation, reception, pedagogical methods and the integration of asylum seekers in companies). This has resulted in the publication of several practical tools. One example was the creation of a 'Welcome Pack' for agencies working with newly arrived asylum seekers, which specifies all the information asylum seekers need when they first arrive. Other publications have included a manual describing the innovative teaching methods developed and used by each transnational partner, and a study on the integration of asylum seekers in companies which examined and compared work and study opportunities for asylum seekers in each partner country.

¹ Not his real name

A staff exchange programme was also set up which allowed reception centre staff to learn about local methods and share experiences in other EU Member States. Nine staff members participated in the exchange in Scotland and Denmark, while Finland received nine persons from Scotland. Suvi Kaljunen, Project Coordinator at Turku Reception Centre explains that: “Transnational exchange provides an excellent opportunity to compare systems and learn about what works and what doesn’t in other contexts and to apply these lessons within our own national context.”

A new transnational partnership has now been formed which includes 6 DP partners from geographically diverse regions of the EU, including two new Member States.

MAINSTREAMING RESULTS AND GOOD PRACTICE

Mainstreaming has been an important part of the Becoming Visible DP’s work. The sharing of good practice and work methods (such as the use of participatory teaching methods and the organisation of an employment fair) have been useful for other reception centres in Finland as well as other organisations working with asylum seekers. Pauli Heikkinen, the Project Manager, described the success of the first round: “The successful results from the first phase have attracted new partners interested in joining the second phase of DP activity.”



New forms of dissemination and awareness raising – organise a fashion show!

The DP was able to promote its activities and results by starting dissemination while the project was going on. Information dissemination to the wider public on a national level was provided by professional public relations officers employed and supervised by the Finnish Association of Adult Education Centres (KTOL), one of the DP partners. This was done using communication tools such as a newsletter and an Internet site, as well as the organisation of national and transnational seminars and a road show which communicated results by travelling to different areas throughout the country. At the local level, DP activities were showcased in local media

The DP has also been active in contacting the Ombudsman for Minorities and Members of Parliament to inform them of legislative gaps and ask them to address issues and problems faced by asylum seekers in Finland. In this way the DP was successful in bringing attention to policies which hinder the job search for asylum seekers, such as the need for valid ID when opening a bank account, and the fact that foreign driving licences expire one year after a person enters Finland.

APPLYING INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

The Becoming Visible DP has developed innovative methods and ways to implement its activities which help asylum seekers become self-sufficient in Finnish society, and which help Finnish society to better understand and appreciate the situation of asylum seekers. From the outset, the DP has aimed to promote the use of innovative approaches, with a particular focus on making sure that asylum seekers could make their voice heard and make a difference in the project. It has achieved this through various methods:

- Asylum seekers have been involved in the organisation as well as teaching of classes. The DP also looked at how the existing skills of reception centre staff as well as asylum seekers could best be put to use through the development of new courses and activities.
- Another example is the use of participatory methods in language teaching, such as the use of drama techniques to enhance learning and apply language skills in different settings (e.g. visiting a museum, taking public transport). Asylum seekers felt more at ease to speak Finnish through these methods. Especially the contextual language

learning helped them to quickly pick up the necessary vocabulary for coping with daily-life situations.

- The DP has ensured continuous monitoring of its activities through the use of feedback forms. The reactions and suggestions provided by participants beneficiaries during the first round of the project have helped to inform and improve the design of activities under the second round. One of the lessons learnt, for example, was the usefulness of developing short courses which have been found to be more cost effective while allowing for wider participation. The fact that decisions on asylum applications are being made quicker in Finland has been another reason to implement this change.

Becoming More Visible DP

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A short version of this
"Success story" and
other "Success
stories" are available
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