

## TO INTEGRATE... IS TO COMMUNICATE!

### **TURNING INSTRUMENTS OF WAR INTO CATALYSTS OF PEACE**

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On 12 October 2007, policy-makers and practitioners gathered in Turin to participate in the conference *'Instruments for the integration of refugees: From the European experiments of EQUAL projects to local realities'*. The scene for this international gathering was Sermig, a former military arsenal where weapons had been produced, loaded onto trains and carried off to the battlefields of Europe during the First and Second World War. The refugee movements that followed in the wake of these wars would later inspire the adoption of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, establishing the right for asylum. Where better to hold a conference to promote this very right of asylum than in this former arsenal, which after having been reduced to a mere skeleton through bomb attacks in the Second World War, was reconstructed into a 'house of peace' by hundreds of volunteers in the eighties. Conference delegates sat on chairs made of the wooden slabs on which weapons had previously been fabricated, beneath a wooden cross made of former rail tracks and surrounded by plants and flowers set in boxes formerly holding bullet shells. As the guide to Sermig explained repeatedly to the conference party, a key aim of the centre was *'to turn instruments of war and death into catalysts of peace and life'* - and providing asylum seekers and refugees with a hot meal in the evening, a roof above their head, decent medical provision and a general warm welcome was one way in which this dream was being pursued.

The integration of asylum seekers in their new societies, both socially and in the labour market, has been the overarching goal of the EQUAL transnational partnership Aware-net. The concept of communication is at the centre of this collaboration between partners of Germany, Ireland, Italy and Slovenia. Operating in often very different legal, political and economic contexts and institutional structures, the partners found common ground in a concern for the lack of communication tools reached out to asylum seekers, on the one hand, and with the distorted views, stereotypes and prejudices on asylum seekers communicated in the wider host society, on the other. Together they set out to devise transnational strategies to address these problems concerning communication and ultimately work towards a fuller participation of asylum seekers.

### **COMMUNICATION AT THE TOP OF THE AGENDA**

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Aware-net consists of the EQUAL development partnerships FLUCHTort<sup>[1]</sup> Hamburg in Germany, the Transition Supports Project in Ireland, IntegRARsi in Italy and PROGRES in Slovenia. FLUCHTort Hamburg works to improve the employability of asylum seekers through training, to secure their access to educational and on-the-job training, and to develop quality standards for their return or onward migration to third countries. It does this through collaboration with public (e.g. Federal Labour Agency and local government departments) and private entities (e.g. business organisations). The Transition Supports Project co-ordinates, integrates, activates and delivers services to separated children seeking asylum and young asylum seeking adults (primarily 17 to 21 years) to enable them to participate in education, both formal and informal, with a view of preparing them for adult life, whether in Ireland or in their country of origin. IntegRARsi explores and sets up pathways and instruments for the socio-vocational training of asylum seekers and refugees through direct service delivery to asylum seekers and capacity-building for those who design and deliver such services. PROGRES, operating in Slovenia where the legal and institutional framework for receiving asylum seekers is in its infancy, plays a key role in the organisation of education and training of the target group and of involving the wider society through the establishment of an employers' network and general awareness raising campaigns.

Through a series of workshops the members of Aware-net identified, and started working towards, the goals and activities of this transnational partnership. The language classes that the host societies organise for those asking asylum was a subject that soon moved up on Aware-net's agenda. Development partnerships in each of the Member States involved had been a close witness to, or directly experienced, how the quality of language courses attended by asylum seekers suffered in a number of respects. Firstly, those teaching the host language to asylum seekers had invariably observed a lack of teaching materials (e.g. course books,

exercises, audio-visual material) adapted to - let alone, reflective of - the daily life experiences of this target group. *'During our first transnational workshop in November 2005 in Hamburg, we came to the conclusion that there is a lack of target-group-specific teaching material.'* (Katerina Hibbe, FLUCTort Hamburg) Course material for foreign language teaching may presume the language's use for leisure or for business, presenting vocabulary and a particular level of grammar suited to that purpose.

Secondly, asking asylum seekers to recount a past event when teaching the past tense, for example, can trigger emotional outbursts which are, through adequate teaching practices, either to be avoided or adequately prepared for. *'Asylum seekers, some of whom have major psychological problems, have a higher probability of recollecting negative and/or traumatic experiences when asked to talk about the past.'* (Katerina Hibbe, FLUCHTort Hamburg) It requires awareness on the part of the teachers and a skilfulness that is not often provided for by teachers of asylum seekers.

Thirdly, designing teaching materials and manuals requires the objective of the language training of asylum seekers to be clarified and expanded. While providing the target group with basis 'survival skills', such as buying items in shops and asking for directions, is invaluable, to stop at this 'crash course' level is considered problematic. *'Just because they are asylum seekers, that does not mean that we should only be offering them the knowledge of how to go to the bakery and the loaf of bread they wanted We need to offer more...'* (Kieran Harrington, Transition Supports Project) The socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers requires a more advanced level of the host language.

Aware-net was to devise instruments to upgrade the quality of language teaching for asylum seekers and ultimately their communication skills facilitating their journey to becoming fuller participants of their new society. A teaching manual became the object of preference.

Another communication issue was studied by the transnational partnership of Aware-net: miscommunication on the concept of asylum and the nature of asylum seekers among members of the host society. Partners of Aware-net shared a concern with the prejudices and stereotypes that exist towards asylum seekers, often fuelled by ignorance. *'In the media of the Member States, reporting on asylum seekers and refugees is not a high priority and, if it does occur, the terms 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' and 'migrant' are often confused. Asylum seekers are often presented as illegally entering, making abuse of the system and trying to move and make their fortune in the West.[...] Furthermore, asylum seekers themselves are rarely given a voice in the media. This would help the audience to identify with them.'* (Barbara Hocevar, journalist for the Slovenian newspaper 'Delo') The partnership agreed that it was necessary to disseminate correct information on asylum and asylum seekers to as wide a group as possible in all of the host countries involved. Here the production of a video through which asylum seekers could convey their accounts of flight and settlement into the new country was considered the main added value of this transnational partnership.

## REACHING OUT TO POLICY-MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS: THE TURIN CONFERENCE

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The conference on 12 October in Turin was to present the main findings and products of the transnational collaboration within the framework of Aware-net. The conference was launched with presentations on the European and national legal frameworks and institutional structures within which the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers in Italy is taking place. The morning sessions discussed, among other things, the European asylum policy and its application in Italy, the activities and achievements of EQUAL partnerships in Italy in Round 1 and 2, and the key specificities of the system through which asylum seekers are supported in Italy, such as decentralisation and network formation.

This set the background for the round table discussion in the afternoon, in which representatives of Italian municipalities exchanged good practice and observations on local reception and integration projects vis-à-vis asylum seekers. *'It is important to embrace existing projects that show good practice rather than inventing new things. We need to consolidate experience and to disseminate good practice.'* (Giuseppe Forlani of the Ministry of the Interior, Asylum Area)

Disseminating the two products of the transnational partnership Aware-net was a key objective of the event. Firstly, ['EQUAL Language - Manual on Second Language Training with Asylum Seekers and Refugees'](#) was presented by Katerina Hibbe from the FLUCHTort Hamburg. With

illustrations extracted from the manual, she explained the rationale for the manual, its target audience and the content of the manual to the conference delegates. The manual discusses in turn the policy and institutional framework in the participating countries for the years 2006/2007, the diversity of the target group and the subsequent need for tailored-made language teaching, tools to develop 'communication competence' in the second language, challenges to teaching methods, examples of good practice and recommendations.

Next, the video '[Equal Voices](#)' was introduced by Federico Fossi from IntegRARsi. Under the slogan of '*to integrate is to communicate*' the video seeks to disseminate correct information on asylum and asylum seekers to an audience which is not expert in asylum seeker issues. '*It is to tackle prejudices and stereotypes on asylum seekers and refugees which are often caused by ignorance*', to promote '*a better comprehension of the needs and expectations of this group*' and '*to gain their empathy*' (Federico Fossi, IntegRARsi). Producing a film, i.e. using audio-visual material to communicate the main message, was chosen due to its predominant position in the world of communication and media. Entering the film into the programme of film festivals is one dissemination strategy that is being pursued by Aware-net. And with success: the film was already shown at the 10th Environment Film Festival of Turin on the 13th of October, together with other films on the theme of asylum seekers and refugees.<sup>[2]</sup>

The plot of the film is 5 asylum seekers and refugees, originating from Africa, Europe and South America, meeting on the shore and in turn narrating some of their hopes, fears and experiences of asylum. This is done in their mother tongue which brings the viewer closer to the story of the narrator and acts a safety net for the latter.

## **A TWO-WAY PROCESS...**

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That integration is a two-way process, requiring action from both the asylum seeker and the host community, has been repeatedly argued. The members of the transnational partnership Aware-net have joined forces to set up activities and products that help those working or coming into contact with asylum seekers to translate this valuable principle into practice. They have developed exciting tools to promote better communication skills on the part of asylum seekers and the dissemination of correct information. They have shown that communication is a two-way process... and the basis for a fuller participation of asylum seekers in their new societies.

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