

Maren Gag

## **WORKING AGAINST OBSTACLES**

### **Research issues from the viewpoint of a development partnership**

Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am also very pleased that it has proved possible to hold this workshop, especially as we can conduct it with a European group. It makes a very special concluding event, following 6 years of exciting and challenging work in the EQUAL programme, to get together in concentrated discussion with outstanding experts in this field, especially as it helps us to use the combination of research and practice for future work on this subject.

Christian Rabergh has addressed some very important areas from the European perspective, arising from the summary of results. He has talked about successes and also obstacles and problems seen by the individual member states. I would now like to talk about our experience in Hamburg as the initiator and coordinator of two major development partnerships, and I hope that will provide stimuli for further work. I will outline future fields of research, and also take a look at further fields of action for the necessary experimental practice, so as to develop them for research.

#### **EQUAL in Hamburg**

The development partnerships conducted in Hamburg from 2002 to the end of 2007 are “Qualification Initiative for Asylum Seekers and Refugees” and “Safe Haven in Hamburg – Vocational Training for Refugees.” The 30 or so projects organised in a network were run by refugee advice centres, youth service organisations, migrant self-help organisations, education and employment organisations, and by school institutes. Other participants were representatives of the relevant Hamburg government departments, the Labour Agency, the Chamber of Trades, and numerous commercial businesses.

The results obtained in Hamburg are representative of experience with asylum seekers in Germany, at any rate for a metropolitan region. Further information will be given by many more colleagues here from other regions in Germany who can input their specific experience in discussion, and expand our proposals from Hamburg.

You are certainly all aware that Germany is one of the countries where the legal framework conditions are extremely restrictive – at any rate for most of the period in which we have conducted EQUAL. It was not until summer this year that an amendment to the Immigration Act was passed, so that some of the asylum seekers and refugees with “tolerated” status could have access to the employment market under certain conditions. In other words, the work for EQUAL involved acting as a kind of underground resistance group, as one colleague described it in Malmö, and to make use of loopholes in the system, so as to enable refugees to get real access to the employment market and not just to conduct specialist activities in a labour market niche.

### **We have achieved several successes in Hamburg:**

The successes in networking by EQUAL have improved the life realities and future perspectives for many refugees and asylum seekers living in Hamburg. These are some of the data:

- *3200 people have received advice and training;*
- *114 training courses have been successfully completed;*
- *400 certificates of training awarded in preparatory and retraining projects;*
- *More than 1000 refugees have attended language, IT and other courses;*
- *More than 350 refugees have completed a placement in companies;*
- *75 men and women have been placed in employment;*
- *Some 240 Hamburg companies are cooperating and providing placements and training places.*

One of the particularly important special results in our view is that we succeeded in persuading business companies to provide training places for refugees. These companies learned about the life situation of refugees via placements and training places, and have recognised that refugees have a high level of motivation, that they have a mastery of several languages, and that it is worthwhile to take them on as trainees.

There are already mainstreaming successes to celebrate in the Hamburg ESF programme in the next funding period. The Hamburg Senate was convinced by results, and is continuing the experimental work for asylum seekers; it has approved an organising association (from our current network) to implement measures for vocational promotion of “tolerated” refugees. We believe that would not have been possible without the change in the law enacted by the Federal Government, and it would not have been possible without the successes achieved by the EQUAL development partnership in Hamburg – this result is the best achieved so far in Germany.

**... but there are still many points that have not yet been achieved ... and there are further questions today** in practice, which have arisen in the course of implementation of EQUAL. Our mental horizons have shifted, because new players have come onto the scene, because policies have changed, and because the refugees themselves are gaining new experience, and they are being faced with new requirements.

There have been some “crises of meaning”, raising new questions that inevitably come up in implementation of a complex programme such as EQUAL. They focused for example on the primacy of a massive restriction policy applied to refugees in Germany (The status of ‘toleration’ is associated with the Asylum Seeker Benefits Act (reduced support, also leading to lower benefits in healthcare, and difficulties in access to the employment market – making it practically impossible in the past for refugees to access this market) . Our evaluators have also put a large number of ideas for further thinking and research into the final report. After gaining this experience, and with new questions in mind, we have encouraged Joachim Schroeder and Louis Henri Seukwa to provide research support to ongoing practical experience on labour market integration of refugees, in order to support further mainstreaming efforts. Incidentally, that was not so very difficult, after all they are the ones who wrote that one of the important consequences of EQUAL was that it was essential to do more research and to summarise and publicise the real world experience of refugees.

**Which clusters of issues and problems would you particularly underline from the viewpoint of EQUAL experience in Hamburg? (The issues indicated here are naturally just a selection ...)**

**(1) Subject oriented research.** Let me just pick out some of the approaches we have taken in this context. In the last 6 years, we have put together a great deal of knowledge about the worlds of refugees and their educational biographies. We have gathered knowledge on the experience related to their flight, which is sometimes traumatic, and on structural barriers and discrimination and racism in Germany, on experience of work and learning, and on refugees' wishes for the future. But this knowledge is mainly related to those refugees who have concentrated on "survival strategies", as Louis Henri would call it. Refugees who succeed in making their way and developing their individual potentials despite the restrictive framework conditions are people who will succeed in acquiring skills and educational qualifications. We have been able to achieve enormous educational successes in our EQUAL projects, e.g. with women who have completed retraining in the IT sector with outstanding grades, and are now employed in the primary labour market; and with young people who had supposedly "poor" starting conditions but who succeeded in completing their training in a wide range of different vocations and likewise have good prospects for long-term integration in the labour market. We have put mainstreaming into practice with these results, and have had some success in convincing companies and policy makers that it is worthwhile to integrate refugees in their businesses.

We know less about those who respond differently to the structural disadvantages in the German educational system, those who drop out of the programmes early without indication of reasons, those who are not able to express what they want in their working lives, and those who would prefer to earn some fast money like many others – but without having a real chance of doing so; those who have not learned how to fit the needs of the labour market and how to respond to those needs; those who are totally out of their depths; those who have a low frustration threshold in their dealings with public authorities; those who are not prepared for their situation in life; those who apparently refuse to look reality in the face, and who "disappear" out of sight of the official channels; those who seem to be unreliable within the learning group; in brief, it was not possible to reach everyone with the conventional concepts. We believe these are good points to take up in research work, in order to find out the exact reasons, to mobilise further potentials, and to identify appropriate practical measures and educational policy.

This group will move more into the focus of attention in view of the new legal framework conditions, making it easier in future for more of the refugees to gain access to education and the employment market. We have found indications showing that, although we at EQUAL have been able to develop and test promising models, they are not able to reach all "types" of losers within the educational system. The conduct and results of a training place campaign which we launched shortly before completion of the programme, with the support of the Hamburg authorities and the Labour Agency, gave rise to a great many questions, which I would like to consider now. We contacted about 300 young people who were now to get access to the employment market following the amendment of the Immigration Act with new regulations for right to stay. However, only very few of them took up our offer of consultation; they rejected the qualification modules for application training which we had arranged for the near future, or else showed little interest in them. These results were in some cases the exact opposite of what we had seen in our practical work so far and in the everyday activities of our projects. The point is not to analyse this particular module of our practical work in detail, but rather to examine the related issue of what response we made to critical

analysis and to refer to the new findings, determined by the long-term effects of discriminating structures – for the refugees themselves, and also with respect to the roles of the players involved.

The question for both groups (described here on a very schematic basis) is how people's wishes for their future employment arise, and whether they can be formulated, or how they are influenced by what is available in the market. It would be interesting to find out in which sectors training and employment places can be found, and in which segments of the labour market vocational integration has been successful. Or, to put it in more general terms, what is the meaning of opening the training market if there are fewer training places available? What impact does the opening of the employment market have on life situations of refugees if they are entering into competition with other disadvantaged participants in the employment market? What routes have to be opened in order for refugees to define their training wishes more clearly? What concepts are needed for the institutions involved?

That is closely linked with the specification written into the EQUAL programme to “strengthen empowerment”. Our internal analysis shows that this subject has not been given sufficient attention. We would have liked to develop more practical experience on that, and obtain more in-depth knowledge of it. The migrant self-help organisations play a major part in that. The Hamburg network includes two of them, that is small institutions originating in the African and Iranian community, which play an important part in the development partnership. It is evident there that there is easy access to the target groups, needs-oriented programmes were developed due to the close relations with these groups, and that the staff working in these programmes are mostly drawn from qualified migrants. Even though the municipalities have increasingly turned their attention to strengthening MSOs (migrant self-help organisations), the situation in Germany is that these organisations are still mainly dominated by German activists. The refugee councils, Pro Asyl and the churches are the most important organisations in this sector. Based on the experience gained within EQUAL, practical workers and researchers should examine how far it is possible to boost mobilisation of the self-help potential of refugees, thus setting up formal and informal structures which would result in real interest organisation of refugees. This is a matter of defining the right concepts and participation models, enabling refugees themselves to participate on an equal level, so that they themselves can play their part as multipliers and intermediaries, and as advisers to policy makers.

**(2) Structure oriented interventions.** EQUAL has used these to generate many impulses to raise the awareness of regular institutions for meeting the specific needs of refugees. This has been done via further training courses and public relations work, practical use of new forms of cooperation, and joint development and testing of new teaching concepts for vocational education. With relation to orientation of teaching concepts taking account of the life situations of refugees, we have drawn the attention of evaluators to a new sociological research discussion and examined the results of EQUAL from a transnational perspective. This approach assumes that refugees are involved in intensive social relations at a number of different places simultaneously, and are characterised by a transnational lifestyle. They have multi-local activities in different countries in different parts of the world. They are included in worldwide social networks between their countries of origin, transit countries, and country of exile. That gives potentials for education, training and the employment market which have in the past been neglected in teaching concepts. It is necessary to go beyond the type of concept applied so far, focusing only on the double option and implying integration either in Germany or in the country of origin. We have already taken a small step in this direction. For example, the project for qualification in building trades included a module called “Building in a Global

Space”. Its aim was to present the ways of building and employment opportunities in other European countries, and to show the trainees (refugees and German nationals!) different employment perspectives (for onward migration or for young Germans to seek employment in another European country, in view of the precarious situation in the building industry in Germany).

Implementing transnational perspectives means taking up new development work in practice and research. What curriculum components are needed in different vocational fields, and how can they be established? What core competencies need to be acquired? What possibilities are there for use of language resources and for their development for labour market integration? What strategies need to be developed to convince the business community and the educational organisations of this conceptual approach?

Competence inventory procedures have been introduced and repeatedly tested in EQUAL, as an essential method to ensure the success of new concepts. There has been a lot of exchange of experience on this subject in Germany and in other European countries. This has created a wide range of tools for improving competencies of refugees – including refugees from the informal sector. One of the methods proposed is to set up portfolios of certificates and other experience acquired, to include them as evidence of potentials available for the educational process or for labour market integration. But the question still remains of how to re-assess these skills in their respective context, in order to make them useful for a transnational educational process. There are limits to this, because assessment is dependent on the legal requirements in the different countries. In Germany, responsibility for education lies with the individual states within the Federal structure; that is relevant to recognition of qualifications, and has to be taken into account in development of ideas for recognition criteria. There is also a need for concepts of adaptation training, to go beyond training on the basis of purely “national” profiles and include the transnational dimension.

In this context it is also necessary to examine the tools used so far to trigger intercultural opening processes in the regular institutions, e.g. the further training modules or campaigns for diversity awareness. It would be interesting to examine what effect these tools achieve, and to examine how far the life situation of refugees is explicitly included in considerations, or whether they are perceived as belonging to people with a migration background, or are simply assumed to be a part of this general group.

**(3) Intervention-oriented examinations.** We believe such examinations should be made to see how far the approaches tested successfully in EQUAL can outlive changes in the law in long-term application. In Germany, we are back to the pre-EQUAL times as soon as the EQUAL programme is finished – the situation of refugees is improved by amendments in the law, but it is still necessary to change the views of the various players and institutions with respect to the educational needs of refugees. It is already becoming clear from practical experience that this process cannot be completed without supporting structures, i.e. there is a need for further development in practice. The rigid isolation policy previously applied with respect to inclusion of refugees in education and employment market has a long-term effect. We have to observe the process and see how far refugees can be freed from their isolated position and overcome the double disadvantage problem (due to additional legal restrictions). We have to examine what roles the social, educational and labour market institutions have to play, and what concepts will be effective in improving the situation, without taking the decisions away from the refugees. We will have plenty of fields for research in Hamburg and Germany. Projects have been approved in the Hamburg programme for the ESF and in a special ESF programme organised at central government level, ensuring access with practical

experience, and certainly giving material for further critical discussion. It will also be interesting to see how far changes in integration policy are reflected in the political mainstream.

Networks are relevant tools for intervention – as we have discovered in the framework of the community initiative. The principle of cooperation in a spirit of partnership has been applied at all levels of the programme. It is not comprehensible that this approach has been stopped with the conclusion of EQUAL – the reasons for this can only be the subject of speculation. It is important to monitor how far network approaches and effects are evident in the European countries, and to what extent they link up with existing networks. We know from the practice of ETG 5 that cooperation between the member states is indispensable to launch interventions at the political level. But there is also a need to work through the exchange of concepts and genuine collaboration at local level in order to develop further forms of European cooperation. For example, we feel it is clearly necessary to continue the project of creation of a manual for second language teaching, which is a transnational product. The product is there, but it is vital to follow up with a further project, for targeted mainstreaming work in the European countries and for more effective intervention in the respective national educational policies. It is important in general terms to have a transnational dimension in educational concepts and a common European refugee policy, and this requires European educational tools to promote migration within the European countries and make it easier for refugees to cross European borders. The potentials of refugees already living in Europe should be used as the first step in a common European migration policy aimed at rectifying the demographic imbalance and compensating for lack of skilled workers by recruiting skilled foreign workers (blue card). Evaluation of the appropriate forms of work is needed, identifying ways to increase the European added value in this direction, and showing the impact on educational and labour market policies in the member states.

### **Outlook**

There is an important issue which has so far been neglected – ‘tolerated’ refugees have very limited options open to them, in view of the restrictive legal situation and the danger of being forced into illegality. The figures are rising, though exact data are not available. Estimates of the number of migrants without official papers in Germany range from 500,000 to 1.5 million. It is thought that there are 100,000 people in Hamburg living in extremely precarious conditions. They have no health care provisions and they are working in badly paid jobs. These life situations and employment market situations have been a taboo within the EQUAL community initiative, but they were very clearly evident in the projects. This subject must be given greater attention in the future.

These are some of the fields of work and questions which arise from our German perspective, after the six years of our work with the EQUAL programme in the field of asylum seekers. The proposals given here are not complete, and we trust that further additions will be made to them in the discussion tomorrow. We are interested in further livening up of the structures created in EQUAL, in practice and in theory. We would like to play our part in coordinating theory and practice, either through informal or formal networks, and to reflect future work in the light of academic discussion.