

SUMMARY OF EUROPEAN POLICY FORUM ON ASYLUM

1. INTRODUCTION

Over 250 persons actively participated in the European Policy Forum on Asylum entitled "Minimum Standard and Beyond" - Towards a dignified standard of living for asylum seekers in Europe", held from 22 – 24 May in Malmö, Sweden.

During three warm and sunny days, representatives from nearly 50 Round 2 EQUAL partnerships, the European Commission, international organisations, refugees, journalists and national ministries from 23 different Member States came together to discuss the many advantages of helping asylum seekers to integrate rather than to exclude them from society, and to jointly identify opportunities to take the EQUAL legacy forward once the programme comes to an end in 2008. Another important focus of the event was to make the case for a more generous application of the various minimum conditions set out in the Reception Directive in the Member States. The discussions centred in particular on access to employment, education and training as well as improving public attitudes and the quality of services to asylum seekers.

2. DAY 1 – EVENING OF 22 MAY

In the evening, all participants were invited to take part in the Opening Ceremony. While enjoying a buffet of Swedish and international delicacies, delegates listened to Anne-Marie Qvarfort, Director General, Swedish ESF-Council, who opened the Showcasing Exhibition with Member State stands presenting national EQUAL good practices. Nearly 20 countries had taken this excellent opportunity and were showing publications, presentations and short films throughout the conference. In addition, DG Employment and Social Affairs, DG Justice, Security and Freedom and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles also each manned a stand. Vocal Six, an a-cappella group of male singers, acted as highly entertaining masters of ceremony.

3. DAY 2 – 23 MAY

3.1. OPENING PLENARY SESSION

A lively Opening Plenary Session in the morning served to set the scene for the event. The session, introduced and facilitated by Göran Rosenberg, a well-known journalist in Sweden, included interesting and inspiring presentations from Peter Stub Jørgensen, Director of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Muriel Guin, Head of Unit from DG Justice, Freedom and Security, Anita Grandin, former Justice and Home Affairs Commissioner, Bjarte Vandvik, General Secretary of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles and co-founder Khaled Abdu, journalist and co-founder of AEASS (Association for Eritrean Asylum Seekers in Sweden).

Göran Rosenberg opened the plenary by stressing the need to further work on the common asylum policy in the European Union, evoking today's context with the increased arrival of refugees coming from countries such as Iraq. "Can the Reception Directive do more than providing mere minimum standards?" he asked the audience, echoing the title of the policy forum.

The first speaker, Kent Andersson, Mayor of Malmö welcomed all participants, saying that the event was held at the right time and at the right place. One third of the population in Malmö has a foreign background and integration has traditionally been high on the policy agenda of the City Council. The Mayor stressed the importance of local authorities in the reception of asylum

seekers, in particular in medium-sized to large cities, where implementation really takes place. As EQUAL projects illustrate, solutions and best practices are developed at the local level. However, discrepancies between cities and countries' approach to refugees undermine the system and Kent Andersson called for more co-operation directly between cities of Europe.

Peter Stub Jørgensen stressed that the successful experiences from seven years of EQUAL will not be abandoned nor lost when the programme comes to an end. "What was possible in EQUAL will also be possible under the new European Social Fund", he argued. "Asylum seekers can still be a target group in the national development progress, but this time it is up to the Member States to decide the scope for setting up projects for asylum seekers".

Over the last eight years, more than 200 million euro have been spent to find ways to improve the life of asylum seekers and about one hundred Development Partnerships have been set up across 25 Member States. This resulted in the creation of many good practices and the capitalisation of valuable experience. While reviewing the national plans, the European Commission will analyse how the experiences drawn from EQUAL can be incorporated into the national programmes. "Member states now have an important work ahead of them, establishing these programmes", Stub Jørgensen said.

Muriel Guin introduced a set of important additional financial measures to assist asylum seekers, namely the new European Refugee Fund. The second phase of this programme is nearing completion, but a third phase, with more funding and a stronger strategic focus, will be launched in 2008. Muriel Guin also provided some first-hand information on the study (still to be published) on the implementation of the Reception Directive. "We were happy to note that, overall, the Directive has been transposed satisfactorily in the majority of Member States", Muriel continued her presentation. She pointed out that there was still however a long way to go, especially due to the wide level of discretion some provisions in the Directive allowed for. The article in relation to access to employment illustrated the variety of options adopted by the Member States. About nine countries allow direct access or access after a shorter period of time than the 12 months stated in the Directive. Sadly, some countries however restricted access through limitations on the type of work, the duration or by prioritising jobs for national or EU citizens.

Anita Gradin was the European Commission's first Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs. She noted that a lot had changed since she left the Commission, and some for the better. She also stressed that Member States should start thinking about their ageing population before deciding to close their doors for asylum seekers and migrants. Anita Gradin praised the efforts of the EQUAL national and transnational partnerships and concluded that the social and vocational integration of asylum seekers was a task which lied at the heart of the social dimension of the European Union, and thus in the European Social Fund.

Bjarte Vandvik and Khaled Abdu painted a slightly less optimistic picture of asylum seeker integration. "The EU often ignores integration of asylum seekers and refugees in order to appear tough" Bjarte said. "This is a short term view as integration programmes not only prevent exclusion from the host society; they also facilitate repatriation and re-integration following the return in the country of origin. On the contrary exclusion fuels tensions, alienates future citizens and prevents any constructive and dignified process of return. ECRE initially strongly welcomed the Directive but there are a number of areas of concern, such as the wide use of discretion and the restriction of free movement".

Khaled Abdu gave a personal account of his arrival in Sweden. "We were disappointed at first, as we were not allowed to do anything and had to wait a long time before a final decision was taken on our status. For one of our friends the uncertainty and the fear of having to go back became too much. He committed suicide. Today, however, most of them are working, although not always at their qualification level". Khaled is one of the founders of the AEASS, the Association of Eritrean Asylum Seekers in Sweden.

3.2. CASE STUDY VISITS

The afternoon of 23 May was dedicated to study visits to the Want2Work project in Copenhagen and the International Health Communicators project in Malmö. In Denmark, participants could in fact chose between three workshops showing different aspects of Want2Work. The first group

headed to the special care centre of the Danish Red Cross Asylum Department. Some asylum seekers are physically handicapped or victims of torture and need special care and support. These asylum seekers live at the Kongelunden centre, close to Copenhagen. The visit began with an introduction by the Director Michael Ehrenfels, who explained that fifteen families lived in the centre today. In most cases at least one parent was mentally ill with the need for support, guidance and treatment. Employees of the centre included psychologists and physiotherapists, to be able to face particularly difficult situations: in 2006 there were 47 admittances to Hospital Psychiatric Ward and 25 attempted suicides.

The special care centre also offers teaching, kindergarten and internal activities to the residents. Educational advisor Charlotte Emmery presented the methods used to create learning processes with a complex target group: educational activities such as language classes are also used to recreate human contacts and help residents to socialise with others. "Language classes are usually attended by very small groups, allowing the teacher to address the specific needs of each resident and provide continuous support and attention" Charlotte Emmery added. Other activities at Kongelunden include computer courses, sewing courses and psycho-educational lectures. Some of these are organised by the Equal Project FOCUS, which concentrates on family centred integration and rehabilitation for vulnerable asylum seekers. Project coordinator Kasper Koch explained that the psychosocial activities and relevant excursions provided a favourable context to build a positive family identity. A lot of time and energy must be invested into building positive relations and confidence, but results were encouraging: participation empowered families to play an active part in the development of a meaningful everyday life.

The second workshop included a presentation of Want2Work's media training and the [New Times Magazine](#), a bi-monthly newspaper written by asylum seekers on issues related to asylum. Of each edition, over 3,000 copies are distributed to asylum centres, Ministries, members of the Danish Parliament, public libraries, asylum and human rights organisations and other media. Participants in this part of the case study visit were invited to attend a media course and an editorial meeting together with the journalists responsible for the magazine. The third workshop presented two other major activities developed in Want2Work's headquarters, the Culture House of the Danish Red Cross, namely the skills assessment tool and the ECDL (European Computer Drivers License). After these activities were introduced, the participants also visited the Copenhagen International Hairdressers School where a group of asylum seekers was following the educational programme as a result of the skills assessment and the CV development workshop.

The visit to the International Health Communicators project in Malmö showed a highly successful example of getting asylum seekers into employment by focusing on their particular strengths and intercultural competences. As part of the EQUAL partnership RE-KOMP, training for this unique new job profile taught asylum seekers, refugees and migrants to act as intermediary persons between their communities and the healthcare sector. Newcomers often have difficulties in understanding the health system in the new society and are reluctant to approach doctors and to discuss their mental and physical problems. Doctors and other health workers do not fully understand the needs and background of newcomers, which can lead to insufficient treatment and over-medication. The International Health Communicators help to improve communication and coordination between these two groups. The visit included a presentation of the job profile, participation in one of the courses and a visit to a health care centre. In addition, the German partnership SAGA, which created a similar employment profile called Language and Cultural Mediators, told the audience how they were now successfully cooperating with a major service provider in Berlin.

3.3. LEARNING SEMINARS

Those preferring to stay in the conference centre had the opportunity to attend several learning seminars on transnationality, skills audits and a case study of reception systems and policies in Finland. Alternatively, they could take a closer look at the Showcasing Exhibition.

The learning seminar on **Finland** started with a presentation of national asylum policy and the reception system. The new minister of EU affairs and migration has recently made the daring proposal to also open up the labour market for asylum seekers which have received a first negative decision, especially in view of the decreasing number of asylum applications. The next

speakers presented two studies which together mapped and caterogised the services offered in Finnish reception centres, with the aim to develop indicators to monitor and assess their performance and quality. The studies included interviews with asylum seekers and staff in reception centres, thus providing an 360° picture of the reception system and paving the way for a quality assurance system for reception services, which would be unique in Europe.

In the learning seminar on **Skills Audits** Sue Waddington (MEET Transnational Partnership) and Martina Früchtl (DP MigraNet) shared their experiences of developing and working with tools to recognise asylum seekers' as well as wider groups of beneficiaries' skills and competences with the audience. Both speakers had been involved in the transnational working group that was created in Round 1 of EQUAL to draw on the experiences and commonalities of skills audits approaches developed by EQUAL Partnerships in five EU Member States. Common elements of the methodology included: (1) Recruitment; (2) Interviews; (3) Assessment; (4) Recording; (5) Choice and barriers; (6) Action planning; and, (7) Continued support.

Sue Waddington illustrated the benefits of skills audits by providing a 'real life' example:

Henry, aged 53, a painter and decorator from Zimbabwe

Following a skills audit Henry was referred to a 'Skilled Refugees into Construction' Course, where he had his skills assessed and accredited through practical work, training and vocational English lessons. He successfully passed the Health and Safety Test needed to work on a construction site in the UK.

Henry took up the offer of work experience, painting and decorating a community centre, which resulted in a decorating company offering him full-time employment. Henry puts his success down to a combination of the support provided by the project staff, improved self-confidence achieved during the work experience and having his skills recognised.

In the Transnationality seminar, the Alliance transnational partnerships talked participants through the do's and don'ts of cooperating with partners from different countries and cultures. "It took some time before we all agreed on the way forward and fully understood each other", coordinator Frans Bastiaens explained. "Some misunderstandings led to really funny situations, but there was nothing that we couldn't resolve by talking and simply working together". He also announced their upcoming conference in the European Parliament on 19 and 20 September 2007, which will present EQUAL good practices and look at migration from different perspectives. Working together with the CASA transnational partnership and 2 Belgian Development Partnerships, the Alliance wants to offer a huge platform from which best and bad practices and the large amount of collected experiences can be presented to an international audience.

3.4. EVENING PROGRAMME

In the evening, the City of Malmö invited all delegates to a lovely dinner in the main room of the historical Town Hall. Kent Andersen presented the history of the building and encouraged the participants to enjoy some typical Swedish dishes.

4. DAY 3 – 24 MAY

The next day demanded a much more active involvement of the participants. The morning session started with three simultaneous 'Setting-the-scene' Seminars providing a general overview of EQUAL results in the three priority areas of the Asylum Seekers theme: Advice, Education and Training; Employment and employer relations; and Capacity building. This was followed by a presentation of a national example in each of the three priority areas which exceeded the minimum standards of the Reception Directive.

4.1. SETTING-THE-SCENE SEMINARS

4.1.1. Advice, Education and Training seminar

Why have EQUAL Partnerships worked with advice, education and training? This question started off the Seminar on the same subject, chaired by Katarina Nilsson from the Swedish National Thematic Network. Katarina Granath from GHK, European Thematic Experts to the Asylum Seekers Theme, clarified that access to advice, education and training was an absolutely crucial element of asylum seekers' integration, as it involved the basic means all of us need to be able to get about in the society. Almost 85% of the 61 EQUAL asylum seekers partnerships operating in Round 2 were implementing advice, education and training activities. Successful approaches included (1) integrating language teaching into a vocational programme – both cost-effective and empowering; (2) specific vocational training programmes for asylum seekers – facilitating the learning process and enabling them to better 'profile' themselves on the labour market; (3) civic education, including intercultural learning – helping asylum seekers to better understand and integrate in the host society; and, (4) traineeships and other forms of work placements – a first and important step to integration into the labour market, also leading to 'real' employment.

In Spain, the minimum standards established in the Reception Directive are exceeded in a number of areas. In fact, asylum seekers can freely access mainstream education and vocational training and can enter the labour market after six months following their asylum application. Spanish representatives from the EQUAL partnership ENEAS, Carmen Abascal and Susana Gende Feely, and Miguel Ángel Aznar from the General Direction of Immigrants Integration, highlighted in the seminar that for them the benefits of going beyond the minimum standards were clear. When asylum seekers had the possibility to take the control of their lives – which was the result of going beyond the minimum standards – this led to: increased autonomy and independence; less dependence on social services; lower risk of psychological/mental health problems; and, (higher) taxes income and social security contributions for the State. The EQUAL partnership was exploiting the full possibilities of the rights of asylum seekers through the implementation of the integrated pathways they had developed. The approach developed under EQUAL was applied throughout the country and provided tailor-fit advice, education, training and employment to asylum seekers. The seminar participants were eager to learn more about the legal situation in Spain, and the rights of asylum seekers to access relevant services. One interesting discussion point was whether family members of asylum seekers have the same rights to access advice, education and training as the asylum seekers themselves.

4.1.2. Employment and employer relations seminar

The seminar on Employment and employer relations, chaired by Christian Råbergh from the Swedish ESF Council started with an overview of the main EQUAL lessons in the priority area by Petra van Nierop from GHK, the organisation providing thematic expertise to the EQUAL Asylum Seekers theme on behalf of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. She explained how, without access to employment, asylum seekers became de-skilled and demotivated and that, in addition, the lack of gainful employment created a situation of dependence on state welfare of support from other organisations. The majority of EQUAL partnerships were implementing activities in the area of employment, including job mediation services, vocational pathways including work placements and voluntary work. Particular success factors highlighted were the creation of new job profiles in countries with a tight labour market and / or restricted access to employment, the development of very close links with employers and the use of IT tools to match the skills and qualifications of asylum seekers with employment opportunities.

Renate Kinzl-Wallner from the regional government of Salzburg in turn presented how asylum seekers in Austrian could access forms of employment 'useful to the community', meaning that they were gainfully employed by local and regional authorities as gardeners, youth services, libraries and so forth. "Even though this type of employment had certain disadvantages, such as the low pay without an employment contract and the fact that it mainly concerned low-skilled labour, it has considerably increased the acceptance of asylum seekers in the local community and has helped asylum seekers to become more motivated", Renate Kinzl-Wallner concluded. The debate that followed primarily focused on how to avoid that asylum seekers are being treated as 'second-hand' citizens when offering similar employment opportunities and how to make sure that they are not being exploited. Whilst helping asylum seekers into employment, through for

example work placements, is certainly very positive, the participants considered that in as far as possible they should be offered employment which matches their skills and qualifications.

4.1.3. Capacity building seminar

The seminar on Capacity building, chaired by David Hudson from the British Refugee Council, started with a brief presentation by Eliza Kritikos from GHK on the EQUAL lessons learnt in the area of capacity building. She explained that already since the beginning of EQUAL it became clear that there was a strong need to focus on the development of information activities and high-quality support services for asylum seekers. A main problem, still today, was that there are some marked differences between the quality and extent of the services provided in the Member States. Moreover, there seemed to be a lack of training of staff and a lack of understanding of the specific needs of asylum seekers. The vast majority of EQUAL partnerships were implementing activities in the area of capacity building, including the provision of training for those working with asylum seekers, the development of methods such as e.g. specific education programmes and training modules for asylum seekers, networking and awareness-raising. These activities were a great success: there was a growing capacity of actors and organisations working with asylum seekers and the basis has been laid for a similar quality of support services across the EU. In addition, forces had been joined to create “one-stop shops”, strong networks and partnerships.

The presentation of EQUAL lessons was followed by an in-depth presentation of the successful example of the Italian National Protection System, centrally coordinated by the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI), which provides housing and many other services in line with high quality standards. The presentation started with an overview, given by Francesco-Paolo Castaldo from the Ministry of Interior Affairs, on the Bossi-Fini Law (189/02). This law established the Protection System for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees coordinated by the Central Service, a dual asylum procedure (a simplified and an ordinary one), seven Territorial Commissions and a National Commission for the Right to Asylum as well as the Identification Centres. Virginia Costa from the Italian Central Services complemented the presentation together with Nadan Petrovic from the National Association of Italian Municipalities by providing some statistics. Strikingly, whereas in 2001 only 2,008 beneficiaries were supported in the territorial projects, this figure went up to 5,347 in 2006. “The concrete sharing of the responsibilities among the institutions at all levels and the choice to integrate services in the territory, rather than organising structures ad hoc for beneficiaries, is what makes the Italian model so efficient” concluded Nadan Petrovic.

4.2. INTERACTIVE WORKSHOPS

Each of the Seminars was subsequently split up into two smaller Interactive Workshops, six in total spread over the conference centre. Each workshop included the presentation of a good practice by two EQUAL partnerships from three different perspectives: a beneficiary (a refugee as unfortunately asylum seekers are not allowed to travel), a practitioner and a policy / decision maker or other actor who took up the challenge to apply the practice more widely.

After the Workshop presentations, the participants were invited to discuss whether the practices that were showcased would work in their particular contexts, and what resources could be used and which partners involved to make such a practice a success. The overall aim of the discussions was to come up with a single recommendation, focusing on future EU and national policy development and programming, to ensure that the EQUAL good practices would be expanded and mainstreamed. The key recommendations presented in the boxes per theme, which would feed directly into the subsequent Closing Plenary session, resulted from the sometimes heated discussions and intensive brainstorming during the Workshops:

4.2.1. Advice, Education and Training workshops

Facilitator Workshop 1.1: Katarina Granath (GHK)

EQUAL partnerships presented Workshop 1.1: Integration of asylum seekers into Maltese society (MT), Equality and Solidarity for Asylum Seekers (CY)

Facilitators Workshop 1.2: Katarina Nilsson (Swedish NTN), Ioana Bornaci (Swedish NTN)

“With Malta’s geographical centrality within the Mediterranean, it has always been a gateway into Europe, but even more so after Malta joined the EU in 2004” Stephen C. Vella from the Maltese EQUAL partnership ‘Integration of asylum seekers into Maltese society’ started his presentation. The Maltese EQUAL project achieved results far beyond what was expected. The total planned number of participants, 30, turned into 116, of which 107 received certifications. 63 jobs were created / retained compared to the planned 12. These extraordinary results come from an intelligent and appealing combination of activities, including language classes, cultural initiatives, a model for evaluating and validating asylum seekers’ competences (EVC), involvement of asylum seekers in projects, production of information packages for asylum seekers and positive media reporting. Hadish Haile, one of the participants, confirmed the success and relevance of the project.

Another southern European country, Cyprus, was also presented in the first of two parallel Workshops under the advice, education and training theme. Cyprus has the highest proportion of asylum seekers of all EU Member States; 27,945 applications were lodged from 2002 to 2007. Only 54 applications had been approved. Louiza Papaloizou from the Cypriot partnership ‘Equality and Solidarity for Asylum Seekers’ told the participants that the EQUAL project was the first initiative ever in Cyprus to work with integration of asylum seekers, providing a combination of language education, social orientation and vocational training. Natasa Andreou from the Ministry of Interior, one of the project partners, expressed the interest of the Ministry in the activities and commented that “We follow the project closely and find it important to be involved as a partner to be able to learn about the activities, provide assistance and draw upon the results first hand”. The vivid debate that followed the two very interesting presentations concentrated on empowerment of asylum seekers and the benefits of and how to involve them in developing projects and policy making.

The second Workshop under the advice, education and training theme involved the ‘ESÉLY’ Development Partnership from Hungary and the Portuguese ‘VIAAS’ project. András Kováts, project manager of the Hungarian partnership, highlighted how the partnership helped participants to get volunteering opportunities. This way asylum seekers had, amongst others, achieved special skills, networking techniques, become acquainted with the public administration system, learnt the Hungarian language and obtained references for future job searching. The Portuguese EQUAL partnership had a wide-reaching approach: their focus was not only on asylum seekers, but also representatives of various relevant institutions and the local community. Tito Matos, project manager, took the participants along on the journey the project had been through: from trying to establish a reception system in Round 1 to focusing on integration of asylum seekers into the society and work opportunities in Round 2. One very innovative element of the project was the finalised new reception centre, which created an open and dynamic space where the local community enjoyed activities together with asylum seekers.

Participants followed up on the importance of establishing a model for recognising asylum seekers’ competences and skills in the debate that followed, something both projects had highlighted in their presentations.

Based on the discussions, the workshops agreed on the following recommendations:

Recommendations - Advice, Education and Training

1. Upon arrival, asylum seekers should have the right to and be informed about: (1) skills audit process, (2) Access to language training and (3) Access to vocational training incorporating a practical component. The needs of disadvantaged groups of asylum seekers should be taken into account.
2. Asylum seekers must have the possibility to have their professional and academic skills recognised. Vocational training should preferably be provided in mainstream programmes with nationals.

4.2.2. Employment and employer relations workshops

Facilitators Workshop 2.1: Ramón Puig (DG EMPL), Henrik Emilsson (Swedish NTN on asylum) Cecile Mathou (GHK)

EQUAL partnerships presented Workshop 2.1: TransKom (DE), a Save Haven Hamburg (DE)

Facilitators Workshop 2.2: Petra van Nierop (GHK), Somers Fry (National Labour Board)

EQUAL partnerships presented Workshop 2.2: Human step (CZ), IntegRARsi (IT)

The two simultaneous workshops on Employment and employer relations included presentations by beneficiaries, practitioners, employers and decision-makers from four EQUAL partnerships. In the first workshop, participants heard how the TransKom project had created a new job profile, called 'Language and Cultural Mediators'. The profile was perfect in a context which prioritises the access to the labour market of German nationals and EU citizens. "We have 31 municipalities participating in North Rhine-Westphalia" said project manager Varinia Morales enthusiastically, "and already during the training phase more than 50% of our participants were offered a job placement. We aim for full professional recognition of our new profile in the near future". Sevim Koko, refugee from Kosovo and currently employed as Health and Cultural Mediator, confirmed the positive outcomes and stressed the empowering value of finding a job which in a sense matched his skills and competences (Sevim is a graduate pharmacist).

The Hamburg project had developed new vocational programmes and in-company training which took account of the labour market needs, enabling asylum seekers to find employment despite existing legal restrictions. At the start of 2007 more than 80 commercial companies in Hamburg were training nearly 100 asylum seekers and/ refugees in the work place. Several participants were offered permanent employment after their work experience. "If we count it all up", explained project manager Maren Gag, "our project is saving the government more than 100,000 euro as they no longer have to provide housing nor subsistence to our group". Maren Gag also stressed that the Reception Directive fell short of the labour market successes of the Community Initiative Programme EQUAL.

In the second workshop, the Czech EQUAL partnership Human Step faced, to a certain extent, the reverse situation as described by the German projects. Czech economy is booming and this has caused labour shortages in several sectors and regions of the country. "However, employers are still rather reluctant to employ foreigners", said Vaclav Gotz, project manager, "our country is not yet used to becoming an immigration country". Human Step created a network of organisations across the whole country, including employment offices, potential employers, non-profit companies and educational institutes to help asylum seekers to improve their skills and to find a suitable job. Jiří Hejnc, employer, explained how he became involved in the project and how his company tried to be an example of equal opportunities and equal treatment. Albert Mukamina, refugee from Congo, emphasised that the employment offered to asylum seekers should also take into account their skills, background and potential, as too often only low-skilled jobs were offered to them.

Daniela Di Capua from the Italian partnership IntegRARsi showed how their project had successfully managed to engage both public and private employers the provision of work placements for asylums seekers. One of these employers was IKEA, which hired a group of newcomers, many of whom in 2007 were still working in their shops in Italy or had a better position elsewhere as a result of their first employment. "We negotiated with IKEA that in return for us pre-selecting and preparing our participants in line with their needs, they would ensure that a good proportion of all their new employees would be asylum seekers and refugees", explained Daniela Di Capua. A similar agreement was reached with the regional tourism office of Lazio, which ensured that a number of asylum seekers could start, after having received appropriate vocational training, in hotels, restaurants and bars in the region. "Sadly, some clients still react badly to a 'black' face, but the hotel owners really stand up for their personnel, which is already quite an achievement" she concluded.

The debates that followed the presentations initially centred on the need to involve all relevant actors when developing job insertion activities for asylum seekers. Umbrella organisations such

as trade unions, branch associations and employer organisations can push their members to open up for Corporate Social Responsibility, diversity and equality and can provide practical support in terms of targeted training and expertise. However, it seems that the key success factor is to find the right economic arguments to get the message across. In addition, these actors all have a voice on the political scene and can put pressure on policy-makers. By doing so, they can have a real impact in putting forward issues such as skills shortages, the need for recognition of qualifications etc. Participants also wondered what difference it would make, in reality, to allow asylum seekers direct access to the EU labour markets, especially given the substantial fall in numbers in the recent years. “We are often not even talking about a few hundred persons, and some Member States which have put restrictions on asylum seeker access to employment dare to claim that they have taken such measures to avoid imbalances to the labour market!” ridiculed one of the workshop participants.

Based on the discussions, the workshops agreed on the following recommendations:

Recommendations - Employment and Employer Relations

3. Employer organisations and trade unions should become involved in opening the labour market for the creation of new jobs based on diversity, and influence policy makers to revise reception conditions.

4. Article 11 should be amended. Asylum seekers should have direct access to employment unless Member States can prove that this will substantially disturb their labour markets. Issues of social inclusion are to be taken into account.

4.2.3. Capacity building workshops

Facilitators Workshop 3.1: David Hudson (ECRE), Eliza Kritikos (GHK)

EQUAL Partnerships presented Workshop 3.1: Becoming more Visible (FI), EASI (UK)

Facilitators Workshop 3.2: Christian Rabergh (Swedish ESF council), Anita Gradin (former JHA Commissioner), George Joseph (Caritas)

Presenters of Workshop 3.2: EASI (UK), Swedish NTN and Liberal Party, German DPs.

The two simultaneous workshops on capacity building area provided for some interesting discussions and comparisons of activities undertaken in this area in different countries. One of the workshops was specifically dedicated to the presentation of grass-root practices which actually managed to inform policy making. All too often, politicians are not aware of local good practices and the strong arguments these provide for adapting political agendas and decisions. The example from James Lee, working on the EASI Development Partnership on behalf of the UK Refugee Council, illustrated how sometimes many ‘small’ voices can together form a single strong and convincing one. When in 2006 the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) decided to stop ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses for adult asylum seekers, EASI joined forces with other organisations and communicated their concerns in writing and through various lobbying activities to the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education. They also attracted the attention of the media. “We placed strong focus on the evidence our projects were generating that showed the exact opposite of the LSC decision, namely that English classes were highly empowering and a first and positive step towards the integration of asylum seekers”. Their efforts paid off. In March 2007 the Minister announced changes to the LSC plans, re-opening the ESOL class-rooms to asylum seekers.

The second presentation showed how the Liberal Party in Sweden launched their asylum policy programme which incorporated nearly all recommendations from the Swedish EQUAL national thematic network. A representative from the local and regional government in the Skåne region confirmed the validity of the recommendations in relation to the support services, education, training and employment of asylum seekers. Finally, Norbert Grehl-Schmidt gave a lively picture

of the work and achievements of the German partnerships and NGOs. He argued that EQUAL, being in Germany a grass-root, NGO-driven initiative, played a major role in changing attitudes and policies. The evidence emerging from the projects managed to convince both the federal and regional governments to take some radical steps to improve the living conditions and procedures for asylum seekers. An example quoted was the recently proposed 'amnesty' for tolerated asylum seekers (i.e. those that cannot return to their country of origin but do not have a status in Germany either).

The other workshop included presentations of two Development Partnerships that had addressed capacity building from two distinct but mutually reinforcing angles: on the one hand capacity building for organisations through targeted training of staff and on the other hand capacity building through the empowerment of asylum seekers by involving them closely in the running of the project. The first DP "Becoming more visible", presented by Pauli Heikkinen (Finnish Red Cross) and Hannu Tuovinen (Reception Centre City of Tampere), concentrated on building capacity for staff working with asylum seekers. Specific courses, designed by a university, included classes on the asylum seeking process, cultural diversity, methods and content in client service and multi-professionalism as a resource. "The courses proved to be highly beneficial since asylum seekers felt much better understood", highlighted Hannu Tuovinen. "Also, our staff found it easier and more rewarding to work with asylum seekers, even in the difficult and tense situations that can sometimes arise in reception centres." The participants agreed that it was crucial that all those working with asylum seekers should follow specific training courses and that clear guidelines, as to what kind of training and qualifications, should be developed at EU level based on the experience of the EQUAL Partnerships.

The EASI DP presented by Louise Salmon (project officer at the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit), Jon Williams (LORECA project coordinator, London Development Agency) and Luse Kanumuangi (a refugee) focused on empowering their beneficiaries by creating an advisory group made up of asylum seekers and refugees to assist in the decision-making processes of the EQUAL partnership. "The advisory group gave asylum seekers a voice", said Louise Salmon. "And at the same time they developed soft skills such as self-expression, leadership and negotiation skills. They were able to clearly express themselves and to come up with suggestions on issues that were affecting asylum seekers in the host society". While other participants pointed out that they had developed similar activities to involve asylum seekers in their projects, EASI was the only Development Partnership which had given such involvement a concrete and continuous structure. It was also this advisory group that helped getting the ESOL classes back. Considering the numerous benefits that the involvement of asylum seekers in such a group brought, all participants were very much in favour on setting up similar groups in their own Development Partnerships and future project activities.

Based on the discussions, the workshops agreed on the following recommendations:

Recommendations - Capacity Building

5. Article 24 should be amended. Member States should give clear guidance on the necessary qualifications for support staff. The empowerment of asylum seekers should be an essential part of all activities targeted at asylum seekers (e.g. setting up an advisory group of asylum seekers).

6. The instruments for dissemination and policy impact used & developed in the EQUAL Initiative should be further developed, adapted and transferred to the new ESF programme.

4.3. PLENARY CLOSING SESSION

With the end of the conference in sight, the final Plenary session focused on the future. “What next? How to ensure that the good practices will actually make a difference?” were a few of the key questions that a panel made up of Jean-Louis De Brouwer, Director of DG Justice, Freedom and Security, Karl Kopp from Pro Asyl, Jan Andersson, Member of the European Parliament and Peo Hansen, Researcher, was asked to consider.

Jean-Louis De Brouwer started the last session of the Policy Forum by announcing an exciting upcoming initiative taken by DG Justice, Freedom and Security, namely the launch of a Green Paper on the future of the Common European Asylum System. “We have high expectations of engaging the whole of Europe in a debate about the future of the European Asylum System”, he said, “a debate which will also take into account your views on the Reception Directive”. The consultation process will culminate in a public hearing in Brussels on 18 October 2007 and inform the preparation of a Policy Plan on asylum, to be presented in the beginning of 2008. Concrete proposals for new policy and legislative action should be finalised in the summer of the same year.

Göran Rosenberg read out the recommendations from the Workshops to the panelist and asked for their comments. These mainly centred on the future developments of the Common European Asylum System and the changes that new actors could bring about. Peo Hansen expressed his worries regarding the expanding ‘externalization’ of the EU’s immigration and asylum policies to third countries, and the adoption of restrictive asylum instruments and security-oriented immigration policies which could reduce the right of asylum to a problem of ‘illegal immigration’.

Mr De Brouwer reminded the audience that developments in the field of asylum seekers have been very impressive, considering that all started less than ten years ago with Amsterdam in 1999. “Remember that it took more than thirty years for the internal market”, he said, praising the enormous work done in the last eight years in such a sensitive policy area. He also highlighted the role of the Parliament, which was to a large extent excluded from the first phase of the decision-making for the European asylum system. This new actor will have a decisive role to play. This vision was shared by Jan Andersson, MEP, who appeared very optimistic about the future role of the Parliament, as a more progressive force able to counter balance the predominantly conservative governments in Europe. With the co-decision system it will have a key role to play.

As a final treat, a young female singer / songwriter and former asylum seeker from Iraq, sang two beautiful songs. It was then up to Jan Andersson to bring the EQUAL Policy Forum to an end. He stressed once again the importance of having an open forum of debate such as the European Parliament, where sensitive issues can be discussed in public and not only behind closed doors. This will allow a proper debate to take place on issues such as skill shortages in the EU and asylum seekers competencies. It will then be essential to make the link between different policies and adopt a more global approach to demographic change, skill shortages and immigration policies. He finally wished all participants a safe journey home.