

DO-IT-YOURSELF!

Lacking motivation to start yet another week of work on Monday mornings? Maybe, but having a structure to the day, going to a place where you know you will meet colleagues and where someone will ask how your weekend was is perhaps not that bad after all. For asylum seekers who arrive in a new country, often with traumatising experiences fresh in their memories, having a meaningful activity whilst waiting for a decision on their asylum application is invaluable. Not only does it help them to deal with the stress and uncertainty, which may last for years, but it also helps them to integrate more quickly into the new society, while giving them valuable experience should they return to their countries of origin.

Before the EQUAL programme was launched, asylum seekers arriving in Sweden were offered organised activities during their first six months in the country by the Swedish Migration Board. Those who then received a positive response to their asylum application and obtained a permanent residence permit, some 40% of applicants in the early years of 2000 but only 10% by 2005 – could participate in further integration promoting activities organised by the municipalities, which took over the responsibility from the Migration Board once the asylum seeking process had been concluded with a positive result. However, in a majority of cases the asylum application process lasted longer than six months, partly due to lengthy appeal processes, and a waiting period of 2-3 years for the final decision was the norm. This meant that asylum seekers were unable to participate in any activity for long periods of time.

This was the context¹ in which the 'Arrival Gothenburg' Development Partnership (DP) started operating in Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden. The partnership is led by the Gothenburg Initiative, an NGO with many years' experience of working with asylum seekers and refugees. Katarina Nilsson, transnational co-ordinator of the project explains: "In our previous work with this very vulnerable group of people we had seen how negatively long waiting periods without activity affected asylum seekers, and how their health and motivation deteriorated. The positive results from the early interventions by the Migration Board were lost, and the work of the municipalities became more difficult when asylum seekers were unable to continue with Swedish language courses and other integration activities."

PROVIDING ASYLUM SEEKERS WITH THE RIGHT TOOLS

How many of us have not tried to put together a piece of furniture bought in one of those 'do-it-yourself' kits, and half-way through the process realised that we do not have the right screwdriver or other essential tool to finish the work? Frustrating? "Yes", most of us would respond. For asylum seekers, trying to put together their life in a new country, and often traumatised by past experiences, lacking knowledge about their new society and how to get by can be devastating to their self-confidence. Being in an uncertain situation as an asylum seeker is, can itself be unhealthy: in Sweden 32% of the expenditure on asylum seekers is used for health care. The Arrival Gothenburg DP decided that something needed to be done urgently, and developed a project providing asylum seekers with the essential tools to be able to integrate into Swedish society. This also



¹ In 2003 the Migration Board changed their practice – it now allows asylum seekers still waiting for a decision after six months in the country to continue in their organised activities

improved the asylum seekers' well-being, which directly decreases costs for Swedish society.

Arrival Gothenburg based their approach on building on and developing asylum seekers' existing language skills. Thematic courses on issues related to Swedish society as well as the EU, combined with study visits to some of the main companies and cultural institutions in the Gothenburg area, and theme days to which municipalities, the Migration Board and representatives of other institutions were invited, were organised. Through the study visits and seminars, the asylum seekers were able to interact with and meet Swedish citizens whilst making practical use of their knowledge and skills.

FOCUSSING ON THE INDIVIDUAL

Individual approaches to assisting asylum seekers with their integration into the new society was imperative for the Arrival project. Equally important was to support and encourage them to make the first contact with employers themselves. This empowered the asylum seekers and proved very positive for their motivation once they started work. Another indicator of the success of this approach was that many asylum seekers who started a traineeship got hired afterwards. Employers even contacted the project on their own initiative and asked if there were more asylum seekers who would be interested in working for them. During the three years the project ran, 100 asylum seekers participated in the courses and 15% got jobs as a result.

"We provided them with the tools to be able to make this happen," Katarina Nilsson explains. "During the project, asylum seekers learnt how to write a CV, we taught them Swedish, how society works and how to approach an employer. They received a certificate stating that they had participated in our activities and could use us as references in their CV. We offered them use of a telephone and support when calling an employer, but in the end, they wanted to make this contact themselves, even though it was sometimes perceived as very difficult." For the asylum seekers, this resulted in increased self-esteem, better health and less incentive to work in the informal economy. "Real" job experience and work references provided the asylum seekers with an entirely different baseline for the future, whether it is spent in Sweden or their country of origin.

Ajani² is an asylum seeker from Nigeria who participated in the project for a year: "It was my own decision to join the project, and I never hesitated. In particular, I found the study visits extremely useful, since I got to meet and speak to Swedish people at their work places, and I actually got a traineeship at one of the companies we visited. I also got a summer job at a home for the elderly."

In Sweden, asylum seekers whose application process is expected to last longer than 4 months are allowed to work. Veronika Hansson, who is in charge of the home for elderly where Ajani works describes her experience: "I did not even know that Ajani was an asylum seeker. He called me himself, and I met him for an interview and decided to hire him. His Swedish skills were good, and we encourage a multi-cultural workplace so I never hesitated because of his origin. We find it very positive that the elderly get to know people from other countries, as it increases their understanding for other cultures and prevents racism due to ignorance."

Ajani was very eager to integrate in his new society, but says that if he had not participated in the project it would have taken him longer and been more difficult. "I want to say thank you, thank you, thank you to the project and the fantastic teachers who always took their time to talk to us and help us."

WORKING TOGETHER IN A CHANGING WORLD

The importance of dialogue, co-operation and partnership between organisations, institutions and authorities dealing with asylum seekers, a key principle of the EQUAL programme, quickly became evident for the Arrival Gothenburg project.

The partnership was the first ever attempt at collaboration between so many different actors working with asylum seekers in the Gothenburg area. The project was led by a Steering Group,

² Not his real name

which brought together the Migration Board, the Gothenburg city council, NGOs such as the Gothenburg Initiative, YMCA/YWCA, Gothenburg City Mission and churches. "Such a big partnership was a completely new way of working for us," Leif Andersson explains. "A very important spin-off effect has been to increase the legitimacy of other actors working in the field, and to not only *think* you know what mandate they have, but to actually *know* their mandate and the people working in these organisations." He adds: "Today we often contact these other organisations to get their views and ideas also on other issues unrelated to the project. We would not have done this three years ago. This process has really brought added value to other facets of our day-to-day work."

The Steering Group was an important forum and platform to discuss issues concerning the project. All partners were committed in writing to participate in the project after having signed the application form, but the work within the group was not formalised, which allowed for flexibility in the learning process of working together as partners.

The organisations had different roles in carrying out the project according to their knowledge and area of expertise. The Migration Board selected participants, the YMCA/YWCA was involved in transnational work, organised spare-time activities and helped with traineeships, while the churches allowed asylum seekers to participate in their other education projects, assisted in the organisation of seminars, and organised discussion groups and individual therapy sessions. The Gothenburg Initiative managed the implementation and execution of the project by organising integrated courses involving language and thematic activities.

SHARING RESULTS

In September 2005, three months before the Arrival Gothenburg Development Partnership ended, a seminar was organised in Gothenburg to share messages and learning experiences from the project to policy makers and authorities in the field. The seminar brought together 30 key actors in the Gothenburg area. Amongst the participants were the Director of the Migration Board in Gothenburg, representatives from asylum and migration district departments, the Gothenburg city council and the Swedish ESF Council. The day started with a short film to introduce the project, which was followed by presentations of the content of the activities, transnational work³, results of the mid-term evaluation and a panel discussion. Christian Rabergh, who works for the Swedish ESF Council and is a member of the National Thematic Network that brings all the Swedish EQUAL asylum seekers projects together, also commented on progress concerning validation of the activities developed by the project.

So were the participants convinced about the usefulness of the project? Leif Andersson, Head of Unit at the Migration Board in Gothenburg, who participated in the seminar, says: "We are working with a very strict budget, and would unfortunately not be able to provide all asylum seekers with this exact programme that has been developed. Having said that, we would definitely be interested in offering it to particularly vulnerable groups who are not able to participate in mainstream activities, and we will spread these lessons in our organisation." Pernilla Wallin, also working at the Migration Board adds: "I was very impressed with the method the project had developed for people working with asylum seekers "the 5Ts".⁴ Even though we may not be able to fully implement it, I will make sure that it is spread amongst our personnel."

Spreading the message about activities that have worked well is key to ensure that the results of valuable innovative work are not lost when a project has finished. Arrival Gothenburg also organised several theme days and seminars on specific issues for policy-makers and other

³ Arrival Gothenburg was part of a transnational partnership, ASPIRE!, involving eight projects from six different countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Ireland, Sweden and the Czech Republic), for more information, see the EQUAL success story "Aspiring for better integration" http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/data/document/etg5-suc-aspire.pdf

⁴ "The 5Ts" method was developed by the project, based on five key components all starting with the letter T in Swedish. In English these are translated as: (1) Time – to listen; (2) Trust – within the group and towards the personnel; (3) Clarity – of procedures and information provided; (4) Availability – to talk about problems and concerns when they occur; and, (5) Belief in the future – to prepare asylum seekers to deal with whatever the outcome of their application may be.

relevant actors. The project was even visited by the Swedish Migration Minister, Barbro Holmberg. This helped to create a dialogue at political level and promote awareness raising at an early stage. It is still too early to say how much of the work of the Arrival partnership will be taken up by the relevant authorities and other organisations but the awareness raising that has been achieved is already a very important first step in this process.

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