The Integration of Asylum Seekers into Maltese Society

"*For me, the EQUAL course has been a divine intervention by God…it helps in finding suitable job. Women should be eager to follow similar courses and be devoted to the training*" – Charity Yousef Udeh, 31, from Nigeria

"*Before I came to Malta, I didn't understand how to speak English at all. At the EQUAL project we learned English for three months. After this we also learned life skills, CV writing and I also managed to learn some Maltese. Everybody was nice with us and I made many friends*" – Eseyas Zemica, 29, from Eritrea

"*The EQUAL project helped many participants to find employment and to be able to communicate at work. By learning English, they have coped easier with the European culture and were able to make new friends, achieve their different goals and fulfil their life ambitions*" – Hadish Haile and family, from Eritrea

Since its entry in the European Union, Malta has experienced a drastic increase in the number of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. Most of the newcomers arrive in overcrowded boats, with women and children being those most at risk during the long trip. Malta is not usually their destination however supplies and several other factors usually see them into Malta's territorial waters. The dream of most refugees and other immigrants is to arrive on Europe's mainland, where it is easier for them to join friends, family and ethnic communities. Malta is not considered to be a final destination, even though today, slowly but surely, recognised refugees have started to settle on this small island.

"Integration of Asylum Seekers into Maltese Society" is an EQUAL project which has been part-financed by the European Union - European Social Fund. Its project leader is Agenzija APPOGG, an agency within the Foundation for Social Services. Other local partners were Dar is-Sliem and Dar il-Qawsalla of OIWAS. This Project foresaw to the development of a training package consisting of three consecutive modules, including English lessons, 'life skills' and labour market orientation. 107 asylum seekers, including Eseyas, Charity and Hadish, have benefited from such modules in different ways.

Aims of the Project

This project had the aim to provide training to asylum seekers on various topics as well as offering them the necessary support and guidance. This helped to empower asylum seekers to become self-sufficient and independent, prepare them for employment in Malta and overseas, and to build a sense of community between asylum seekers themselves as well as within the Maltese society.

With the help of the EQUAL project, asylum seekers had the chance to improve their personal situation and their prospects of employment as well as social and vocational integration. This was only possible through the provision of several training programmes and support, to improve their employability. Another aim was that of developing an employment strategy appropriate to the needs of asylum seekers allowed living and working in Malta. Thus they have been given the chance to play a role in society as well as managing their own lives, to improve their integration in Malta or other European countries as well as their repatriation.

Training carried out

The training activities within the Project consisted of courses for asylum seekers, with the most important being English language courses carried out by ETC. These helped participants obtain working knowledge of the English language to increase the integration possibilities both in the Malta as well as in other European countries, if there is no possibility of re-integration in their country of origin. Life skills courses, managed by Red Cross, covered various subjects such as communication, health and hygiene, nutrition, culture, decision making and preparation for employment. Participants where also trained on how to prepare a 'curriculum vitae' as well as provided with the skills required for a job interview, with the help of the General Workers Union.

Through EQUAL 7, asylum seekers have also been empowered through evaluation and feedback on each course they have participated in. Such feedback has been in turn taken into consideration in the design and implementation of possible future courses. Another method was that of identifying each participant's strengths as well as their training needs. They were also encouraged to work towards building a career, either locally or abroad, and to work towards their inclusion in society.

Innovation

The EQUAL project has offered asylum seekers with the necessary support, training, guidance and work placements or apprenticeships within the limitations of the current legislation. Moreover, the training courses offered to participants covered both social and vocational integration.

The innovative element of this project was primarily the activities will all be targeted towards asylum seekers, and are tailored specifically for this target group. Also, this will be the first time that local partners collaborated on this type of project and for this target group.

Another important aspect was the trans-national collaboration of Aġenzija Appoġġ with the foreign countries participating in EQUAL, which where Italy, Germany, Greece and Portugal. From this exchange, local partners have shared experiences and best practices used in the other countries. This collaboration did not only serve for sharing of practices in the field but also resulted in the formulation and production of an Evaluation, Validation and Certification of Competences (EVC) model. The EVC model enables individual abilities, skills and potential of the asylum seeker to be assessed and shows how the competence analysis can be used in other European countries using a uniform approach. The aim of this model is to demonstrate possibilities of how the results of competence analyses can be transferred to other member countries of the European Union. The following country can thus benefit from being able to use existing results and integrate immigrants into the labour market within a short time.

Positive Outcomes

The commitment shown by participants in gaining maximum out of this project is second to none. The indicators reveal that the project obtained a 535% success/satisfaction rate

on a local level. Originally the project was aimed to achieve 20 certified beneficiaries but the project managed to certify 107 asylum seekers.

Training delivery took place at the heart of a local village - specifically chosen to be 'within' society and not somewhere remotely detached from social activity. Transport was also provided throughout the project and gathered participants from various localities in Malta, thus facilitating attendance. Asylum seekers were also involved in various extra-curricular activities which helped them become more acquainted with the Maltese culture and heritage, thus integrating better within our society.

A good number of asylum seekers who benefited from the Project found employment and settled and integrated locally; others managed to obtain visas to countries through schemes offered by non-European nations, such as USA; others have benefited through bilateral agreements with European states to accommodate an amount of immigrants into their own country.

This project has also been classified as good practice by the European Commission and its project leader has been invited to various conferences overseas on several occasions to convey the successful outcome of this project.

National Mainstreaming Conference 2008

The EQUAL project will come to an end during a National Mainstreaming Conference that will host various guest speakers, both local and foreign. It will also include the participation of members of the audience through drama fora and testimonials from young asylum seekers.

This conference is of particular interest to entities and policy makers in the educational and vocational training and employment, service providers in these areas, with particular reference to heads of educational establishments, employers, and Unions, asylums seekers and those working in the migration sector.

For further information about the EQUAL Project and Mainstreaming Conference visit www.appogg.gov.mt. Agenzija Appogg forms part of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which also incorporates Agenzija sedqa (www.sedqa.gov.mt) and Agenzija Sapport (www.sapport.gov.mt).