



ALL ARE EQUAL, BUT SOME
ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

Dirk van den Boom

Independent consultant and evaluator
on behalf of the EQUAL Development Partnerships

shaping migration strategies

European Parliament
Brussels, 20 September 2007

shaping migration strategies

patterns - practices - policies

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are all EQUAL.

In 2001 the EU launched the community initiative EQUAL, designed to fight discrimination and inequality on European labour markets. My look at this initiative will show a paradox. My look at this initiative will show inequality within equality.

Despite the free movement of persons and freedom to work anywhere in the EU, the labour markets of the EU-member states are managed quite differently. So despite of overarching common goals, national programmes in every country give a unique interpretation.

And this interpretation can be quite unique.

This is especially true when it comes to the issue of migration and asylum. For the first time EQUAL has integrated not only legal migrants with status, but also refugees and asylum-seekers into a Community initiative. A bold move and one which should be commended. Development partnerships – that is networks of projects – have sprung up in all EU-member-states dealing with these issues. The task ahead was always the same: Find innovative approaches to the integration of legal migrants and to the integration or re-integration – that is return – of asylum-seekers into the labour-market. And as the issue of return was included in many national programmes – for example Germany – EQUAL was suddenly not only about EU-labour markets, but also about labour-markets in countries of origin throughout the world. The projects' approaches and instruments had not only to be innovative, but also to facilitate mainstreaming - which is the reason why seven project-networks or development partnerships from six countries have organized this conference.

The development-partnerships have tried, and they have done well. They include projects that deal with migrants as well as asylum-seekers. And while working together and exchanging ideas and experiences in preparation of this conference, they came to realize a very profound fact:

If you put biographies of migrants and asylum-seekers from different EU-countries side by side and compare them, you will find that exactly the same person would have had a totally different life and development if only he would have set his first foot in another part, another country of the EU.

In this presentation, ladies and gentlemen, I want to highlight the sometimes very disturbing heterogeneity. Maybe you have a problem in understanding why I call it disturbing, maybe not. That is what happens when policy meets practice. I hope after this presentation you will acknowledge that the wording is correct.

So, let me introduce to you Abdul

Abdul is a good friend of mine. I've met him in many different European countries. I actually invited him to this conference but he was not allowed to travel in Europe. He is afraid this could influence his procedure. Every time he told me the story of his life. Despite the fact that Abdul never changed and has always been the same person, his stories changed all the time.

For instance, Abdul arrived in Denmark and applied for asylum. His case was accepted, and he could now stay in The Red Cross centers while authorities determined whether he could be granted asylum or not.

In Denmark, asylum seekers are not allowed to work and access to the established education system is limited. Not being able to work and use his skills and resources as the educated teacher he is, Abduls is sad. He wanted to work – to maintain and strengthen his resources and to contribute to the society he - as asylum seeker – wished to be a part of.

shaping migration strategies

patterns - practices - policies

But Abdul got lucky, as Denmark has an equal project called want2work, operated by the Red Cross Asylum Department. Want2work offered Abdul a thorough skills audit, and corresponding activities. A personalized plan of action was made based on an incentive ladder. This incentive ladder, the fundamental method behind the project, offers different possibilities at every step. They range from internal language courses to external, certified programs – working with the formal as well as the informal skills of the participant.

Being without opportunities to work and not being able to make use of your skills and resources, you lose your horizon, as Abdul said. He saw two aspects of the Want2work project – one being that it compensates for the lack of access to work and one being the opportunity to prepare for an active working life, regardless if this would be in Denmark (if granted asylum) or elsewhere (if rejected).

Based on the skills audit Abdul could enrol at the University of Copenhagen in a program for multimedia-technology. Abdul could not remain in Denmark. He returned to Kabul where he now works as a manager for an IT-company. Abdul feels over-qualified for his job. The Afghan systems are not advanced enough for Abdul to make proper use of his skills. However, in spite of the situation and security in Afghanistan he prefers this to the waiting time in asylum centres in Denmark, where he felt the system was formed to reject the skills he wanted to contribute.

The opportunities for empowerment and inclusion provided by the want2work project, gave Abdul the strength to take a new decision for himself. Had it not been for this, he would probably not have returned – at least not voluntarily. He would not have actively used the resources he had when he first came to Denmark. If granted asylum, without any training he might have had to start over again. But if granted asylum with the chances provided by the EQUAL-project, he could have continued his education and made good use of his qualifications in Danish society.

Interestingly, one **Belgium development partnership**, which is also represented in the organization of this conference, has this idea right in its name: “Right2Learn”. And essentially, they are providing similar services like the Danish project, although Abdul’s case would have been different, if he would have stayed in Flanders and would have learned the local language, as all asylum-seekers in Flanders have recently got the right to enter regular adult education programmes for free. The new asylum law even allows courses and training programs for asylum-seekers, but concrete activities have not started yet.

A basic idea of the EQUAL partners is included in these versions of Abdul’s story: Empowerment and inclusion. They are two sides of one coin, as we all understand what it takes to achieve inclusion through empowerment. But the endeavours of EQUAL found limits in national government regulations: In Denmark, where Abdul was not allowed to work or to be trained, he was lucky to be just in time for EQUAL to receive at least that amount of support for his own empowerment that was necessary for his own decision-making process to start. In any other case, he would have remained isolated and disempowered waiting in the reception centre. Be it for integration or for sustainable re-integration, empowerment, the awakening of self-respect and the knowledge of one’s own resources, is essential.

My friend Abdul’s brother.

He came to Spain as an asylum-seeker. Abdul’s brother is medical doctor. Six months after his arrival, the decision still pending, he was allowed to work legally. Advisers of the Spanish ENEAS project showed him three pathways to integration: A short term integration pathway, with occupational training as a first aid assistant, to work as a life-guard at beaches and swimming-pools.

A medium-term integration pathway, with labour integration as first aid assistance and additional education, courses for qualification and preparation for the exams to recognize his degree.

shaping migration strategies

patterns - practices - policies

And finally a long term integration pathway, with labour integration as a medical doctor.

When Abdul's brother shortly considered returning to his country of origin, they offered him two parallel pathways: One for integration in Spain, one for re-integration, both loaded with training and education. The choice was his.

These two stories of my friend Abdul and his brother show that the individual experience of an asylum-seeker can be very different depending on which country he arrives in. We have seen in the development partnerships plenty of evidence for the fact that in countries with more liberal strategies for asylum-seekers, a high level of inclusion can be achieved. In these countries, empowerment has been proven to prosper better and this has a positive effect on both integration and re-integration. In a more restrictive environment, the risk of failure is much higher. With more liberal policies, all outcomes of integration or re-integration are possible, and they take into account the wishes of the individual. With less liberal policies, economic and societal marginalization in either the EU member states or non-sustainable return to countries of origin are much more likely, as the individual resources have been allowed to decay over mostly lengthy decision-processes.

This is especially true, the younger the individuals are.

Let me illustrate that with Abdul's daughter, Alisha.

When Abdul came to Denmark as an asylum-seeker, his wife Fatima and Alisha, who was at that point twelve years old, went to Germany. They arrived at the regional state of the Saarland and lived in a reception centre with 1500 inhabitants. They quickly discovered that there was no law requiring the daughter to go to school, as the regional government didn't find it important that they were educated. Fatima saw youths of various ages roaming the reception centre without anything to do and without any education. Youths with no daily chore of duties and no chance to participate in a meaningful sphere of learning and working were loitering in the camp with the imminent danger of unrest, depression, alcoholism, vandalism and criminal careers.

Fatima and Abdul didn't like it very much.

Fortunate for them, the German development partnership SEPA tried to counteract this development by assisting pupils. They were allowed to do so despite the fact that normally youngsters below the age of 16 are not included in the EQUAL programme.

SEPA assisted pupils participating in different schools on the primary and secondary school level. But there were also students going to a training centre for vocational subjects and some went to a special school for children with learning difficulties. For all these different types of schooling the out-of-school services of the project tried to empower the pupils to participate in the classes successfully. There was out-of-school assistance with homework and individual support in preparing for exams, there was advice for pupils and their families relating to school matters, to motivation, self-control and social-pedagogic supervision.

Alisha had ample opportunity to spend the many years she and her mother had to wait for their decision to finish her secondary education with success. Although they were rejected, they could stay because return to their country was impossible. She tried to enter the labour market with her fresh qualifications and she didn't succeed. Work-permissions were hard to come by, and there was no job-training without a prior work-permission. She had to wait with her mother until finally the German government decided to deal with „old cases“ and gave them the possibility that they could stay. For Alisha, it was just in time. For her mother, it was already too late. Overwhelmed by a sudden „permission shock“, she absolutely had no idea what to do with herself after years of doing nothing.

shaping migration strategies

patterns - practices - policies

In the meantime, the Government of the Saarland recognized the importance of education for children of asylum seekers and is in the process of changing the administrative regulations.

As this example shows, some projects found themselves in the strange calamity that they were funded by a programme fighting against discrimination on the labour-market while at the same time this very discrimination was officially intended and sanctioned by government-regulations. National policies changed whilst the projects were running: the example of the Netherlands shows vividly how a political process can cause the pendulum of politics in regard to asylum-seekers to swing from one side to the other within a relatively short period of time.

Fatima's friend Marlene

I want to share a last example with you, one that gives us some more information about the return to countries of origin. And for the sake of the story let me introduce to you Fatima's friend Marlene.

Marlene came from Angola to the Netherlands alone at the age of 15 because of the war. And of course she felt lonely and lost in the Netherlands.

She felt the promise of a beautiful future might be replaced by the reality of not being wanted, but still being safer than in a war lasting over 30 years. The war finished in 2002 and consequently, it was no longer possible for asylum seekers from Angola to stay in Europe. There is peace and it is time to return.

Despite all kinds of problems and hardships there are lots of opportunities in Angola. So many that Angola also has migrants. From all over Africa people come to Luanda for a job.

Marlene is at the end of her asylum procedure. Her counsellors inform her that soon the moment will come for her to leave the Netherlands.

Marlene is pregnant and only within months her baby will be born. Her options are either illegality or return to Angola. Marlene weighs her options and decides that because of her baby, illegality is not an option. Having made this decision Marlene takes matters in her own hands. She consults her counsellor first cautiously but then more certain and straight forward. She discusses issues with the father of her baby and starts to make a plan. In Angola this plan will put the future of herself and her new family in their own hands.

And that's what it is all about: Having your future in your own hands.

Now the decision is made, Marlene wants to return to the Province of Lubango where life is very different from the capital Luanda. She decides that selling ice-cream will be her economic future.

Having made the decision to return and with concrete ideas for her future, organizations in the Netherlands and in Angola work for her. The result is a largely donated soft-ice machine by the Dutch association of icemakers. Now the definite return is planned and the necessary vaccinations for her - in the mean time born - child have taken place. Transport of materials and import in Angola is organized and financed. Electricity and long term supply of raw materials for ice-cream making are secured.

Marlene has returned to Angola, but only because there was no other way out. Of course she oversaw all opportunities to stay in Europe no matter what. But only to have perspective in the future in her own hands again, only because organizations collaborated in the Netherlands, only because she had a truly interested counsellor and only because organizations collaborated in Angola, she is - as we speak - making ice-cream in her home region.

shaping migration strategies

patterns - practices - policies

These examples illustrate our conclusions, already mentioned:

- (1) Be it for integration or for sustainable re-integration, empowerment, the awakening of self-respect and the knowledge of one's own resources, is essential.
- (2) In a more restrictive environment, the risk of failure is much higher. With more liberal policies all outcomes are possible and based on the free will of the individual, while with less liberal policies, marginalization in the host country in the case of acceptance and non-sustainable return in the case of rejection are much more likely, as the individual resources have been allowed to decay over mostly lengthy decision-procedures.

Consequently, barriers for participation and integration of refugees and migrants need to be removed, especially barriers to education and training. We see that migration policies rarely consider the potential that refugees and migrants bring with them. Too often these policies stress restrictions and obstacles for refugees and migrants. Restrictive measures tend to de-motivate people who then lose their capacity to look after themselves. They are considered, and indeed can become, a burden for receiving countries. Similarly, refugees, migrants in general, very often cannot develop their potential to benefit themselves and their host society. However, it is in the best interest of all to build on the resources which refugees and migrants have in order to strengthen their capacities. We have learned in our projects that access to the labour market, education, health and other public resources are important incentives to develop their own capabilities. Such a policy, empowering refugees and migrants to lead fulfilling lives, also has positive effects on the receiving societies in terms of enhancing individual autonomy, reducing social costs and increasing public acceptance of the value of refugees and migrants. Early participation is in the best interests of all, irrespective of the long-term options for refugees and migrants.

Strategies used by governments to deal with the influx of migrants have not always helped to provide the innovation EQUAL stands for. In the area of migration outside the asylum-context, work was easier and public perception more accessible. In regard to asylum, the problems were bigger.

Of course, we know all this. The projects have experienced it, they have experienced the good and the bad sides of this diversity. And the European Union through its various institutions has already reacted. The Commission's efforts in the last years to come to a coherent migration strategy show an increasing priority from the Community side, as presented this morning by Commissioner Frattini. The new blue-card-proposal is a good example as well. And the European Parliament takes a catalysing role in for example the implementation of the Hague Programme. However, while we are here talking at the European Level, we know that most of the problem lies elsewhere: In the way many national governments continue to neglect or resist European proposals and decisions in regard to all of the migration-policy. This does not only reflect in the special case of asylum - which has been chosen as the centrepiece of this presentation to show the big differences - , it also reflects heavily in the issue of illegal migrants as well as regular economic migration. This is understandable up to a point. Short-term political considerations - especially how to win the next election - often supersede the better knowledge about the problems caused by a changing demography. And the Dutch and German projects had the experience that the pendulum of politics can quickly swing from a more restrictive towards a more liberal approach. Still, after comparing the different experiences in so many activities, the development-partnerships represented in this conference found it urgent to ask for more coherence, for more cooperation and for more reasoning. Migration and asylum are trans-national issues. The fact that the EU-level has gone much further in proposing liberal and adjusted policies in regard to this field and the fact that in many member-states policies are still too slow, too backward, too restrictive and too static, is hard to understand for practitioners in the field. Practitioners who are supposed to work with EU-money on the one hand, are hampered by national restrictions on the other. Of course, this is not the case in every country and with every issue. But even the difference

shaping migration strategies

patterns - practices - policies

between the officially adopted policy and the reality is sometimes so big that action has to be taken. This is the case for example in regard to the time-frame in which an asylum-application should be decided upon, which is mostly much longer than officially regulated.

Also, the projects witnessed a certain lack of coherence on the EU-level itself. It has not always been clear if the DGs dealing with the issue – Justice on the one hand, Employment on the other – were sharing the same vision and if they made their programmes and efforts compatible. When the projects tasked with the issue of voluntary return were faced with the fact that they were not allowed to use EQUAL money beyond the borders of the Union, the problem of sustainability in return could only be dealt with from the EU side. Fortunately, the latest calls by DG Justice in regard to projects in this area have seen this contradiction and ask for complementary activities with other budget lines.

EQUAL development partnerships, focussed on either recognized refugees, other migrants or asylum-seekers, have been successful in pointing out ways and means how to support, enhance, conserve and develop the resources of their target group in a cooperative, innovative and dedicated process. The track record all over the EU is not only impressive, it is encouraging. Beyond political wrangling and ideological differences, the individual migrant, whatever and wherever his or her perspective is, has been at the focus of attention. Looking at individual biographies, EQUAL projects illustrate many examples of the benefits and opportunities of migration as well as the pitfalls if the process is not managed effectively. Asylum-policy, as a very specific aspect of migration, remains a distinctive problem with many different national approaches. These approaches often still view the asylum-seeker – recognized or not – as a burden instead of an asset.

Ladies and Gentlemen, from their work the development partnership learned that viewing migrants as good or bad depending on the way they entered the EU is not productive. If we are serious about the fact that we need migration and that we have to cope with this world-wide phenomenon in a constructive and even visionary way, the EU is in the ideal position to take the lead and provide additional focus and progress. But this leadership role is only possible, when EU-member states agree to agree.

This seems to be a problem right now. A common legal and social framework for EU-migration policy would be of enormous benefit to projects on the ground. The development partnerships represented here strongly advocate additional efforts made in this direction. It would help them to work more efficient and effective towards a common goal: This common goal is allowing the resources of migrants and refugees to blossom and develop: To blossom and develop for the benefit of both, the EU as well as the countries of origin.