

## Public service employment in the regions of Salzburg: Refugees collaborate with municipalities

Long waiting periods until the end of the asylum process, no occupation, an isolated life in the refugees quarter, hardly any contact between Austrian population and asylum seekers. This is the description of a refugee's typical living situation, especially in the rural regions.

This enforced inactiveness during the asylum process is a psychological and social burden and has consequences as far as after the awarding of the refugee status. Refugees become unmotivated and the personal and professional resources plainly waste away. This proves as an obstacle far over the field of integration in the labour market, but impedes a holistic integration process from happening. The ex post reactivation of resources after acceptance of asylum proves costly in time and methods. Often, the integration will be hindered by unemployment and lack of measures of occupational preparation and of re-integration in the labour market.

However, the possibility for asylum seekers to actively participate in the municipalities exists. The federal law on primary care (GVG-B) opens up the possibility for asylum seekers to be occupied within public service employment in federal, regional or municipal facilities. This demonstrates a clear, legal regularisation of asylum seeker's occupation. On the part of the Ministry of Economics and the Ministry of the Interior it is also clarified that public service employment is free from the duty of declaration of social insurance, income tax and tax of wages. This leads to a satisfactory clarification of the question about laws concerning employment of foreigners and social security.

This possibility was put to the test by FluEqual in three of the project regions in the state of Salzburg: In each of the three regions a regional collaborator was nominated, who was responsible for the initiation, organisation and supervision of public service employment directly on-site. In a prior positioning paper from Autarq2, a network of five Equal development partnerships in Austria, the legal basis is described and also essential quality standards for the implementation of public service employment for asylum seekers are listed. Below, important steps and experiences regarding the realisation of public service employment will be specified.

**“Work was the first word that made fun saying it in German. It was neither the word love, nor the word hope, not even to speak about faith. Without work, there was only angst. This was the word at the beginning. Only then came all the others. All the refugees felt that way.”**

### Steps in the municipalities

Additionally to the legal framework, it is a first step to establish commitment with the potential “employers” (mostly mayors, chief officers). That means to develop, in a corporate manner, possibilities of occupational fields, as well as to appoint the shape of participation on the side of the municipality. This happens under consideration of the needs and demands of the municipality and is synthesised with the asylum seeker's qualifications and skills. The aim of public service employment is for the asylum seekers to generate benefits, that otherwise could not be achieved by municipalities, the state or region due to lack of financial resources. This way, the problem of endangering existing jobs or hindering future jobs to arise, can be made redundant. At the same time, illegal occupation gets diminished.

On the side of the “employer” it is to be clarified who will have the responsibility for the realisation of the public service work. This person or department will take over the role of a contact for the asylum seeker as well as the supervision during the time of employment. This person or department further acts as a cooperation partner for the local site providing primary care, above all regarding the choice of suitable asylum seeker, taking on the job of coordinating the assignment and being responsible for the orientation phase. Sufficient German knowledge is a requirement for public service employment. Previous language courses form a necessity.

## Possible occupational fields

Possible occupational fields within municipal public service work are:

- Supporting the municipalities with auxiliary activities aimed at social duties (kindergarten, old people's home, Food on Wheels and so on )
- Looking after parks and appurtenant structures
- Looking after bicycle paths or cross-country ski runs
- Supporting non-profit associations, parishes and cultural initiatives (stage design, decoration, site-supervision, personal services)
- Helping hands in the field of recycling and waste control
- Public service duties in accord with the municipality (mending of bicycles, sewing service and so on)

Mostly, there are no special requirements towards the asylum seekers acting in the above mentioned occupational fields. A consideration of the already existing skills of the asylum seekers had, according to our experience, a very positive influence on the quality of the works. It is necessary to turn one's attention to create equal occupational possibilities for men and women. As a matter of fact, the majority of the tasks in the municipalities have to do with heavy physical work, which restricts the women's possibilities mostly to classical fields like cleaning and social tasks.

## Commitments

With the “employers” agreeing on the occupational offer, they also take over certain commitments: The for the work task necessary auxiliaries and suitable work clothes are to be made available by the “employers”. Records about the hours worked are to be kept. Further, a documentation of the expenses of the hours worked is to be made. The accounting and payout of these expenses should be scheduled with hindsight at a fixed date. Asylum seekers in basic care have a health insurance. An accident insurance becomes indispensable and has to be catered for: here, we have to refer to a commercial insurance company. After completion of the public service work, every asylum seeker should receive a confirmation about the work performed, in a similar shape to a recommendation letter. Such a recommendation could essentially help in the later placing of the asylum seeker in the labour market, after having been granted asylum.

## A contribution to more acceptance

Public service employment can also contribute to help raise public acceptance of asylum seekers in the municipalities. The local inhabitants should be informed about public service employment by means of regional PR and media work. This supports a positive perception of asylum seekers as valuable members of the community that contribute to the community life. This can be helpful to diminish existing stereotypes about asylum seekers.

The feedback from the municipalities about his form of occupation was, after an initial period of hesitation, very positive: 14 municipalities have been offering possibilities for public service employment in the frame of FluEqual, 63 asylum seekers have accomplished more than 15.000 working hours. Through the project, personal contacts between asylum seekers, municipal workers and other members of the community were established, that outlasted the project duration. One municipality planed to actually employ one of the asylum seekers (that is to offer a regular employment status) after the positive completion of his/her asylum process.

## The example Mitra M.

Mitra M. is a 32 years old woman, coming from an Islamic country in the Middle East. She came halfway through 2004 with her husband and her children to Austria, in order to place an asylum application. Already years ago, Mitra and her husband have converted from Islam to Christianity. Due to developments in her country of origin, the situation was getting more and more dangerous, when she finally decided to escape to a country that enables them to unrestricted freedom of religion and provide shelter from persecution. Mitra's husband was journalist. Both have their roots in well-off families. Even harder was it therefore for Mitra, her husband and their two children to spend the first months in a quarter for asylum seekers. After approximately ten months the family was able to start once more an almost “normal” family life. The family from the Middle East could be integrated well in a small rural municipality with around 600 inhabitants. The children

have integrated themselves without problems in school and kindergarten. Mitra and her husband have frequented one of FluEqual's German courses in the dimension of 200 hours and completed the latter with success. The gathered language competences have helped them immensely to integrate themselves in the village life.

FluEqual's project of organising public service employment has opened up a new possibility for Mitra, which allows her a positive anticipation of the future. Since December 2006, she can work on two half-days per week in the local parish kindergarten. She loves to work with children and as it showed was quickly accepted by the local children. This way, the children start from an early age to get in touch with a person from a different culture, which leads to the perception of the asylum seekers as a normal member of society.

Also on part of her colleagues she was accepted as a full-fledged co-worker and team member after a short time. The kindergarten already decided that she can keep working for them and as the case may be even extend her hours, beyond the completion of the project. Additionally, Mitra completed an education to become a day mother, an education that fully meets her expectations and that will give her the chance to continue working in the rural region after having been granted asylum.