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LINK TO WORK

A PROGRAMME TO INTEGRATE MIGRANTS FROM EASTERN EUROPE INTO THE LABOUR MARKET AND PROVIDE THEM WITH COMPREHENSIVE SOCIAL SUPPORT.

In 2014 Ghent had an average of 15,727 jobseekers of whom 5,584 were from an ethnic minority (35%). Also 7,142 of those, or 45%, had no or a low qualification.

In recent years the city of Ghent has been confronted with a large influx of Slovak and Bulgarian citizens, mostly of Roma origin, who are looking for better lives and job opportunities. Out of a total of 250,000 inhabitants in the city of Ghent, there are up to 10,000 migrants with Slovak or Bulgarian roots. In contrast, in 2014 only 638 people of Slovakian or Bulgarian origin were registered with the Public Employment Services.

The vast majority of these migrants are facing many difficulties in accessing the labour market due to their rather problematic backgrounds; including problems such as unfinished basic education, weak labour skills and no work experience. Most of them do not speak Dutch and face difficulties registering with the city authorities.

THE LINK TO WORK PROGRAMME

To combat this, Ghent set up a steering group to design and implement actions in the field of migrant integration, one of which was the LINK TO WORK initiative.

The project aims to integrate migrants from Eastern Europe into the labour market. It focuses on the provision of comprehensive support to families facing various social issues and exploring effective methods to integrate the target groups into society.

The partnership implementing the project is led by the city and composed of:

- the regional and local public employment service (VDAB)

- a project NGO - 'Ghent - city at work' which belongs to the city and aims to promote more and better jobs. It is made up of over 60 partner-organisations in the field of employment, education and welfare
- a welfare organisation - De SLOEP supporting families with children.

The project consists of two sub-projects: 'Ankerfiguren' and 'Go between'. Both projects are regularly monitored and evaluated by all the participating organisations as well as by the workers involved in the initiative, with a constant exchange of views and experience sharing.

The two initiatives in brief:

- 'Ankerfiguren' is based on a personalised approach and brings together the different services provided to the target groups. Two 'anchors' or mediators of Slovak and Bulgarian origin, assist the unemployed by providing support with everyday matters such as housing or health care, answering their questions and guiding them towards the employment or social office, professional counsellors or language courses. These 'anchors' work within the public employment service offices (PES) to ensure contact with the target groups is smooth and easy.

JOB SEEKERS AND NEWCOMERS CAN COMMUNICATE IN THEIR OWN LANGUAGE



- ‘Go between’ is an initiative implemented by the Municipal House of the Child ‘De SLOEP’ which offers a variety of parental support (education, housing, health etc.) to families with children from nine months to six years and in particular to pregnant

women, families living in poverty, or with migrant backgrounds. De SLOEP works closely with other welfare organisations. The ‘Go between’ project started from the realisation that parents who benefit from social support very often face serious issues

in finding their way into employment. Counsellors from De SLOEP and the PES form a team to guide the target groups towards the best social services for them, professional training or employment, providing their own specific expertise in each domain.

SUCCESS FACTORS AND INNOVATION

▪ Ankerfiguren project

Having Slovak and Bulgarian ‘anchors’ proved to be successful: job seekers and newcomers can communicate in their own language and easily establish a relationship with them. The ‘anchors’ have been of substantial help in approaching the target group, providing useful information and establishing a valuable link between the target groups and local authorities.

As a result, registration with the official employment services has increased.

▪ ‘Go between’ project

The integration of welfare and employment services helped target a section of the population that would otherwise most likely never have been identified by the employment services. It was innovative to have the starting point as welfare counselling: beneficiaries are identified by welfare organisations working on parental support and then offered professional training or employment opportunities, with a seamless transition from welfare to employment guidance.

In autumn 2015 a publication on the LINK TO WORK initiative will be published containing a detailed description of the methodology and the main features of success.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

- Developing services starting from the client’s perspective and providing intense guidance led to greater outreach.
- Mediation and counselling is based very much on trust: having mediators speaking the same language as beneficiaries helped create that trust.
- Thanks to the relationship with the mediators, beneficiaries turn to them with a wide range of issues, which are indirect obstacles to accessing the labour market. A holistic approach is therefore required in order to deal with these issues (housing, childcare, labour etc.) and specific investment is needed to coordinate and network different services.
- Focusing on the new influx of migrants including new EU-citizens or ‘intra—European citizens’ from former Eastern European countries and Roma helps target specific issues.
- Fine tuning the profiles and competences of the mediators and regular service providers is needed in order to improve the approach towards clients with ‘a-typical’ problems and situations, such as, having a recent migration background or lacking some basic employability skills.

