

## ≡ Practical examples – Asylum seekers

### Bread and Dignity

*"We hope for lasting protection - and get 'unsecured residence status'.  
We long for freedom - and are placed in 'obligatory accommodation'.  
We look for bread and dignity - and do not get any work permit.  
We wish for the same rights - and find our selves in 'deportation jails'."*  
Rachel, asylum seeker from Togo

### Looks Grim for asylum seekers

Marieluise Beck, the former Commissioner of the Federal Government for Migration, Refugees and Integration asserted the general situation with the vocational training of immigrants in Germany as grim in the 2003 Symposium of the Federal Work Groups for Asylum[1]. The position of the illegal immigrants and people with so called Duldung[2] is particularly hard – due to the German labour and residence laws – they have almost no chance to access vocational training or employment.

*"Due to the third-country regulation, it is now almost impossible to achieve a refugee status and with it a regular access to the labour market in Germany. Apart from achievements of separate projects and progress on the level of individual communes, the situation in the country has not changed much ever since",* says Achim Pohlmann the Coordinator of TransKom Healthy & Social Development Partnership (DP). While the asylum request procedure normally requires two years, he continues, some asylum seekers and refugees have to wait for the final decision concerning their status for up to 14 years. Most of these people have Duldung - their asylum applications have been rejected, but for various reasons (like missing documents or personal data) they cannot be sent back to their country of origin or the European Member State where they first arrived. People with Duldung or 'unsecured residence status' may stay in Germany for long years; living under a constant threat of expatriation with little or no chance for employment and education for them and their children. Presently, there are approximately 210,000 asylum seekers with Duldung living in Germany, some 65,000 in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) alone.

To address this situation, the TransSpuK DP had carried out the SpraKuM project to qualify asylum seekers and refugees as "Language and Culture Mediators" during the first EQUAL round, thus developing a new job profile. Since July 2005 Diakonie Wuppertal is continuing these activities together with other DP partners by further mainstreaming and training for this profile. In the EQUAL second round the TransKom DP is also working on a number of other sub-projects focusing primarily on young applicants who are undergoing the asylum process and youngsters with Duldung, as the situation of education and vocational training for youth is one of the thematic priorities of the NRW government.

With the DP TransKom, the operative partners implement a number of sub-projects, which provide crucial work experience for refugees and especially young refugees in innovative employment areas which do not pose a competitive "threat" on the labour market to the German and other EU citizens. TransKom seeks to provide the young people who seek asylum in Germany with access to vocational training and knowledge of the country's social and healthcare systems through a number of successful sub-projects and initiatives. Two of these are "SpraKuM II - Qualification for Language and Culture Mediators" for young and

adult refugees and "Voluntary Social Year for Asylum Seekers", which mainly addresses young refugees.

## **Germany needs Language and Culture Mediators**

SpraKuM II is a sub-project implemented under the general objective of the TransKom DP – to provide education and vocational training possibilities to refugees and though these offer them real job perspectives. The DP also strives to contribute to the intercultural opening of Germany's social and healthcare services. The training for the SpraKuM sub-project takes place in Aachen and Wuppertal offering qualifications for asylum seekers and refugees to become Language and Culture Mediators (LCM). The LCM are assisting the representatives of the health and social sectors and their foreign patients or clients in professional interpretation and sociocultural mediation to avoid language problems and information deficits.



The whole SPAKTRUM group together

The SpraKuM training activities started already during the first EQUAL Round (2002-2005), under the TransSpuK DP, which in cooperation with the university clinic Hamburg-Eppendorf certified 27 asylum seekers and refugees as LCM, involving over 200 institutions<sup>[3]</sup> in the provision of vocational training posts and resulting in over 1,300 mediation cases handled. The acute and widespread demand for this service confirmed the relevance and timeliness of the new profession being created. With the help of the strategic partners and the placement-institutes, 70 per cent of the first SpraKuM project participants entered the labour market, working in public or private organisations, 60 per cent of them as LCM.

The sub-project SpraKuM II has started in July 2005 and will run until 31 December 2007 building on the previous achievements and aiming to provide the LCM qualification to further 65 refugees and asylum seekers. The training period is 2½ years, and following the German tradition of Dual education system, it includes 1½ years of theory and one year practice.

The first theoretical module of this training places emphasis on learning or improving the German language. The language training is supplemented with basic knowledge about the social law and the social science, the history of migration in Europe and a critical reflection about participants' own migration experience. In the second module refugees and asylum seekers get information about the German social and healthcare systems. This is completed with training in interpretation techniques, which take account of the professional, linguistic and socio-cultural requirements of the health and social sector, specifics of the intercultural communication and mediation to adequately consider culturally determined behaviour in communication situations. The third module has a different emphasis in the two training locations – Wuppertal and Aachen – the first focuses on psychology, psychotherapy and

psychiatry for the health sector while the later on child and youth welfare services for the social sector.

The SpraKuM II training also offers further training and certification in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and in German language. Creative and cultural activities in groups (for example the production of a TV-movie concerning honour killings, theatre and choral-performances, a newsletter etc) provide refugees with additional skills, the opportunity to develop social and professional relations, rehabilitation as well as a possibility to tell their side of the story directly to the host society. The involvement in these voluntary projects raises self-esteem of the participants and empowers them.

Provided that all the participants will be able to finish the SpraKuM II courses despite the ever-present possibility of expatriation, this training will provide them with the competences they will be able to use, regardless of the outcome of the asylum procedure. Ms. Lara Naoum (22) from Iraq, who passed the SpraKuM II admission tests in 2005 said: *"I find the project very interesting. Every day I learn something new about the structure and characteristics of the social, health and education systems in Germany. This provides me with tools and knowledge about how to help other immigrants and asylum seekers."* Apart from the SpraKuM II training, the possibilities for people like Ms. Naoum, who are above the maturity age and have Duldung, are practically reduced to nothing. She has no right to education and training, gets no certification of her previously acquired skills, the possible development of which is further hindered by requirements of a special allowance to travel.

*"If we did not have the EQUAL programme, we could not implement this kind of project. The country's inner political situation would not allow it"*, said Ms. Varinia Morales the project leader and coordinator of SpraKuM. In these conditions, it comes as no surprise that the refugees and asylum seekers are highly motivated to take part and successfully graduate this not yet officially recognised training. Regardless of their limited financial resources (some receive co-finances, some donations), people come from more than 31 locations in Northern Westphalia to take part in the SpraKuM training in Wuppertal or Aachen. Some of them, often in poor physical and mental health, are ready to travel for 3-4 hours daily with the train plus the distance to the remote asylum centres. The networking and lobbying activities of SpraKuM have ensured that all the people from the SpraKuM training during the first EQUAL round could successfully finish the course and helped the participants with Duldung to make a stand against their repatriation. In the second round only one participant was forced to leave the training to be sent back to the country of origin. Even in the case of return, the training and assistance provided by the project as well as the DP cooperation with German or international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) help the asylum seekers to find employment in their home country.

However, the victory is not coming without a fight and it is certainly not an easy one. For Ms. Cigdem Akinci, a Kurd with Duldung who arrived in Germany from Turkey ten years ago, a much feared letter has just arrived bringing the news about her imminent leave. Despite the fact that Ms. Akinci has graduated the first SpraKuM training, is working for regional Workers Welfare Association as LCM for the Kurdish and Turkish families and children, that her sisters and parents are allowed to stay, she must leave the country. The battle is lost on legal grounds, but the fight goes on for her stay in Germany for humanitarian reasons. Presently Ms. Akinci is at the mercy of the Härtefall Kommission (the Commission that reviews difficult cases), which advises the Foreigners Office on the final decision. However, unlike many others, after the SpraKuM training and with the support of the project members, she is not facing this fight alone and unprepared.

Through creation of the sub-project BIG (Education Institute in Healthcare), a Central Language and Culture Mediation Agency, the TransKom DP is also able to assist its training graduates with their placement as LCMs in various institutions. The Agency also serves as a coordinator optimising the services of the Mediators by managing the administration of these transfers and offering further training opportunities to the mediators in the other sub-projects of the DP. The Agency is able to offer Culture and Language mediation services in approximately 61 languages and dialects from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Near and Middle East, to a wide range of different clients primarily in the social and healthcare sectors.

## **Equal Chances for Equally Worthy**

In general the Voluntary Social Year is a legally based[\[4\]](#), nation wide instrument for German youth intended to offer a one-year-long professional orientation (before University or between school and employment) that may enable them to choose a future employment profile. Following a simple principle of equality, the TransKom DP has taken this tradition and expanded it to include the same possibilities for young asylum seekers and refugees, thus creating the Social Year for Asylum Seekers (SYAS)[\[5\]](#). As the Voluntary Social Year is not regarded as a competitive activity on the labour market, it constitutes an ingeniously simple solution for sidestepping the Principle of Community Preference[\[6\]](#) in offering young asylum seekers and refugees the possibility of receiving vocational training.



Discussing the future - participants putting their heads together

Within the framework of SYAS, a TransKom sub-project placed within Diakonisches Jahr of the Evangelic Church in Rhineland (Bonn), 17 to 26 years old refugees and asylum seekers with Duldung have a possibility to receive one-year-long professional orientation in institutions of health and social care (hospitals, home for elderly etc.). The SYAS also comprises 25 days of seminar to qualify the participants as assistants working in social or healthcare sectors. The SYAS sub-project offers orientation and employment qualifications for asylums seekers in the services for child-care, youth, elderly, disabled people or in the general health care. In the SYAS seminars young asylum seekers and refugees receive an introduction in the chosen field of employment, can reflect on the traineeship experience, learn about work-related topics, find out how it is to work in the institutions and receive support in the development of personal employment perspective.

As a result of the recent reform of the Healthcare system in Germany, the patients are released ever earlier from the hospitals and clinics. The young asylum seekers and refugees, who got qualified within the SYAS, are ideally situated to provide further assistance services to these people. The participants undertake 38.5 hours of practical training weekly. They are tutored in practical skills by the personnel working in the health care or social sectors, and if the need arises may receive personal assistance from TransKom Partnership. In addition to seminars,

TransKom provides young asylum seekers undertaking SYAS with a possibility to pass a drivers license, receive qualifications in languages and IT training.

As a large majority of young asylum seekers arriving in Germany have only graduated secondary school, they face very slim chances of accessing its labour market. This was the case for Vilson, who arrived in Germany five years ago. The only option open for him was TransKom – he applied and got selected to be among the first young people to take part in SYAS[7]. "I have done the Year now and it was fun" said Vilson: "I invested myself totally and have been invited by my employer to remain in my work place." Vilson had done his training in a house for elderly people, helping out with the laundry, work in the kitchen and garden. He did it so well and with such commitment that his employer wanted to keep him also after the end of the SYAS. Already for a couple of months Vilson has been fighting to get a work permit to stay in his position. He has finally got it now, but it meant two months of constant stress, watching the Foreigners Office and the Employment Agency playing ping pong with his application. "If my employer and lawyer had not fought along", he said: "I would still have no work permit. My employer said 'He worked hard for one year and established excellent contact with the people he worked for. We only want him.'"

Young asylum seekers often face a lot red tape, bringing their application – and their personal development – to a halt unless they are assisted by specialised or legal services. In addition, attitudes in the host society are often hostile. It takes a great deal of reflection and patience to understand why people act like that towards them and how they should act in return. During the SYAS young asylum seekers have this opportunity of developing their understanding as well as their ability to independently cope with the difficulty of their situation as an "immigrant". But more importantly, the SYAS participants have the possibility to gain self-confidence through employment – the ability to work, to strive for excellence and to gain the empowering idea of helping people by doing this. The SYAS also facilitates the access of young asylum seekers to further education within or outside TransKom DP.

### **Training Diversity in the 'Immigration' Society**

Taking the Chinese Taijitu diagram (☯) as a model, SpraKuM and SYAS may be regarded as the "yin" and the Diversity training as the "yang" in promoting the intercultural integration of asylum seekers. SpraKuM and SYAS prepare asylum seekers for the employment in social and healthcare sectors while Diversity training promotes the intercultural openness among the German service providers. *"Our trained refugees are able to support in a sensitive and competent way other asylum seekers in their cause",* said Varinia Morales: *"But the TransKom practice is even more effective, as we simultaneously provide specialised training to asylum seekers on the one side and the employees of the health and social sectors on the other. It is this two-sided process that makes the practice so successful."*

After the achievements of the SpraKuM in the EQUAL Round 1, the TransKom DP is seeking ways to involve ever more people from institutions providing social and healthcare services in the Partnership's activities. The idea is simple - more vocational training places mean more possibilities for asylum seekers' integration and consequently more inter-culturally open health and social services. The goal of the Diversity training is thus two-fold: 1) to raise the intercultural awareness and to promote diversity among the staff of the institutions providing healthcare and social services, and 2) to make these services more accessible and better suited for the needs of the asylum seekers as well as other people with migration background living in Germany. The two dimensions are of course interrelated as the improvements in one are very likely to bring along a progress in the other and vice versa.

The TransKom DP invites the providers of healthcare and social services (or in fact any service provider) to explore the diversity management potential of their institution by asking four simple questions:

- Have you already targeted people with migration background as clients for your products and services?
- Are you offering services to these clients following the principle "the client is the king"?
- Are you using the creative potential of teams composed of diverse personnel as well as multicultural teams?
- Are you expanding your markets in other countries through employees who are adequately trained and originate from these countries?[\[8\]](#)

If not, it may be the best moment to start, as there are approximately 12 million people of non-German heritage presently residing in the country, and by 2010 it is expected that around 50 percent of the people under the age of 40 will have a migration-background. Furthermore, Germany's recent reform of the healthcare system is putting new competitive pressures on its employees to provide ever better services in a more cost-efficient way. The increasing competition with the European Union (EU) enlargement and the growing awareness about the country's "Migration society" may provide challenges as well as business opportunities that may mean rethinking the service orientation strategies and human resources management approaches of the actors providing healthcare and social services.

The Diversity training may be a first step in building upon the opportunities of a more diverse workforce and the creative capacity brought along by more inter-culturally diverse healthcare and social service personnel. This TransKom sub-project offers courses to the workers of social and pedagogical services, caretakers and healthcare providers, doctors, psychologists and psychotherapists spread over a period of 15 months, with the aim of developing a more efficient service offer for migrants in healthcare and social fields. This entails trans-cultural sensitising, development of general intercultural competence and culture-specific knowledge as well as its integration into the everyday working life.

Both the testimonies of doctors and NGOs dealing with immigrants point towards the crucial importance of language ability and intercultural competence as a basis for more efficient health care [\[9\]](#) and social services that benefits both the client and the service provider. More inter-culturally-aware service suppliers or institutions employing Language and Cultural Mediators may avoid the costs of ineffective treatment or service, wrong drug prescriptions or administrative formalities, repeated and lengthy treatment due to language misunderstandings or different cultural ways of communicating about the illness, prophylaxis, or a social issue. In addition, an enlarged circle of clients and better suited services may bring in an extra profit and a better image to the social and healthcare institutions.

Despite of the apparent benefits, the healthcare and social services remain relatively closed to immigrants. To a large extent this is due to the relatively conservative attitudes widespread in these traditionally "well established" service sectors. Furthermore, doctors and social service providers, who are used to the "authoritarian" roles of their professions, do not enjoy being told they lack skills and intercultural openness. Therefore TransKom has worked hard to make the Diversity training a part of the official vocational training menu for these professionals. The Partnership's training is endorsed by the regional strategic partners and is uniting two TransKom operational partners Psychosocial Centre (PSZ) Düsseldorf and the Educational Institute in Healthcare (BiG) Essen with the Doctors Chambers of NRW and the

Chambers of Psychotherapists in the provision of the third session of the Diversity training course this autumn. The 350 hours training, consisting of seminars, project work in the field of expertise, learning groups, intercultural project management and supervision, offer healthcare personnel the possibility to gather the compulsory annual training points by developing their intercultural competence. The participants of the Diversity training receive an official certification of their newly gained skills from BiG.

Involving the people who would really benefit from the Diversity training remains one of the biggest challenges of TransKom, as the large majority of people interested in the course are often already aware and open to its subject. The investment of the refugees themselves becomes a crucial factor in breaking down stereotypes and admission barriers beyond the limits of this group. As most TransKom participants undergo two traineeships – one in social administration and one in healthcare institutions – these experiences constitute an excellent possibility for the asylum seekers to promote themselves as dedicated and highly motivated workers. Young people like Lara, Cigdem and Vilson have confirmed their commitment. It is thanks to them and the efforts of many others that the number of institutions providing vocational training places for refugees keeps growing.

## **Returning Dignity to asylum seekers**

Naturally the image of asylum seekers as highly motivated employees and trainees is not spread by them alone. TransKom DP is a part of the Work Group of asylum in the Thematic Network Migration, which consists of eight DPs of operational partners working very closely together on the political stage to make policy recommendations on matters concerning asylum seekers and refugees. *"There is no alternative to migration. It has always existed. And now more than ever, we are living in a globalised world in which people are in a constant mobility"*, asserted Mr. Pohlmann: *"We have to be aware of this process and make the necessary further arrangements so that this reality is also reflected on the level of local communities."*

The partners united under TransKom see the "inter-culturality" as something already existent and permanent, which is so far very poorly reflected in the organisation of the Federal Republic of Germany. There is a tendency to overemphasise the drawbacks of migration while as Ms. Morales said: *"We do not seem to see 'the good', integrated foreigners"*. All too often, it is forgotten that Europe is and has always been dependant on immigration for workforce, as well as the richness of its cultural and social life. On behalf of TransKom, Mr. Pohlmann argues for preserving this diversity and openness: *"For us it is absolutely crucial to make sure that asylum seekers have access to work, education and vocational training. Without these, we have to think what kind of image the people who have lived here will have of Europe when returning to their country of origin."*

To mainstream these ideas, the eight DPs are organising regular conferences uniting policy makers and industry representatives as well as awareness seminars for top company management and Chambers of Commerce. In fact, these mainstreaming events are so effective because they create links between the BAG and companies, which never before worked together with asylum seekers. It is the businesses who eventually are the most meticulous defenders of the asylum seekers "cause" as they have pragmatically asserted that asylum seekers are highly motivated and are eager to explore this potential. There have been cases of asylum seekers working in companies which were later forbidden to employ them. This provoked the fierce protests from the side of business against these limitations, with the successful outcome that these work placements became again available to asylum seekers.

The main arguments used concerned the fact that the asylum seekers were already integrated into the companies' working environment and into the social structures of the local community.

To address similar situations, the German Minister of Interior and the Government Coalition Partners recently adopted a new compromise concerning the residence rights of refugees who are socially and economically integrated. However, this welcome step does not have a considerable influence on the objectives of the Work Group, as it will apply only to some out of the over 200.000 people with 'unsecured residence status' living in Germany. The legislation of 16/17 November concerns only those asylum seekers and refugees, who have permanently resided in Germany already for six years and have an underage child attending a school or kindergarten as well as those single refugees, who have spent eight years in the country and already have a permanent job. Exceptions to the rule are possible for those who are undertaking apprenticeships in required professions, elderly people and families, which do not or only temporarily live from the social welfare.[\[10\]](#)

Taking account of the limited number of people influenced by this legislation and high inclusion criteria, the NGOs working with asylum seekers and refugees find this compromise insufficient. Most of the people with Duldung remain outside the scope of this regulation and thus continue to live under the constant threat of repatriation. Only very few asylum seekers, participating in the activities of the TransKom DP, will profit from the new compromise.

TransKom therefore continues the course taken during Round one into the second EQAUL programming period. The DP will continue to develop synergies between its subprojects to provide continuous, real and relevant vocational training opportunities for refugees. The improved timing and connectivity of the projects should allow asylum seekers to make transitions from one TransKom subproject to another, and thus continue their personal development. This is a crucial precondition to the successful personal development of those young asylum seekers, who have not yet received the primary education or do not have the right to continue their studies. In this context, the TransKom DP will also continue to lobby for the access to education for the people above the maturity age. The Partnership emphasises that age cannot be the only criteria for asylum seekers' access to education, which is best completed before the vocational training activities and beginning of their working life.

The Round 2 will also see TransKom trying to set and mainstream unified rules across all communes involved in the Partnerships activities in order to develop more effective and quick procedures for asylum seekers' access to vocational training. Presently the institutions willing to employ asylum seekers must be ready to face 2-12 month of voluminous paper work to contact and persuade the relevant Employment Agency or Foreigners Department to offer the possible work permit. The Partnership hopes to achieve this harmonisation by the force of positive example – presenting good practice examples of the communes working with the TransKom DP to other communes inside and outside the Development Partnership through public campaigns. They are also regularly organising small discussion groups for city mayors, department directors and heads of administration, to inform them about the refugees' achievements in TransKom subprojects and the progress of other cities.

All these activities may be grouped behind the slogan "Bread and Dignity", which was a title of the Federal Working Group for Asylum mainstreaming conference during the first round of EQUAL. The core idea underpinning the work of all the asylum Development Partnerships is that it is not enough to give asylum seekers "bread" – petty financial coupons and minimum social support; they also require "dignity" – qualifications, jobs, and access to education and

training. Providing these rights to asylum seekers takes open mindedness and investment from the side of the host society but it brings generous returns – lower social costs as asylum seekers are in a position to take care of them selves and valuable (or one might even say "irreplaceable") employees contributing to the prosperity, wellbeing as well as the integrity of the society as a whole. The activities of the TransKom DP are the best proof for this.

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[Link to EQUAL database description](#)

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[1] From an unpublished meeting document: Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration. Fachtagung der Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Asyl-Entwicklungspartnerschaften. "Brot und Würde: Berufliche Qualifizierung von Flüchtlingen ohne gesicherten Aufenthalt.", page 6. (A summary of this document is available on the Flüchtlingsrat Schleswig-Holstein e.V. webpage: [www.frsh.de/perspective/buag\\_veranst.htm](http://www.frsh.de/perspective/buag_veranst.htm)).

[2] Concept of "Duldung" means that the immigrants are technically illegal but allowed to stay temporally in the country due to irregularity or uncertainty related to their status, country of origin or the country though which they have arrived in Germany.

[3] These institutions providing social and healthcare services were situated in 18 communes: Bochum, Bonn, Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Heiligenhaus, Kaarst, Köln, Krefeld, Meerbusch, Mettmann, Moers, Monheim, Neuss, Neukirchen-Vlyn, Oberhausen, Ratingen, Remscheid, Unna, und Wuppertal. The participation of such large number of communes in SpraKuM-subproject of the I. EQUAL-Round is one of the indicators indicating the relevance of the project's activities.

[4] The legal framework for the Voluntary Social Year (VSY) is established in several German Federal states. Normally during the VSY, young people receive the benefits of €100 pocket money, train-card, housing, social security insurance and special qualification offers. The concrete content of the VSY is decided by the organisation providing the orientation.

[5] (German) Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr für junge Menschen mit ungesichertem Aufenthaltsstatus.

[6] Community preference principle implies that non-EU nationals should only be admitted for employment purposes if the vacancies cannot be filled by "national or Community manpower". This principle only really affects low-skilled migrants since most Member States exempt highly skilled workers and corporate employees. A more thorough definition of Community preference principle may be found at SKADPLUS: [europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11331.htm](http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11331.htm)

[7] The first ever Social Year for Asylum Seekers ran from September 2005 to August 2006. TransKom started its second training year in September 2006.

[8] "Potenziale Entdecken" Diversity Management brochure. [www.teil4.de/intqua/pdf/flyer\\_060913\\_potenziale.pdf](http://www.teil4.de/intqua/pdf/flyer_060913_potenziale.pdf)

[9] OASE Pankow e.V. 's contribution. "Immigrant Women's Access to Health Care in Germany." Accessible online at: [www.comune.forli.fo.it/Documenti/39/Berlino.pdf](http://www.comune.forli.fo.it/Documenti/39/Berlino.pdf)

[10] TOP 6 Bleiberecht., Bleiberechtsbeschluss der IMK vom 17.11.2006." pages 1, 4 and 6. Accessible among other at: [www.politikerscreen.de/index.php/Common/Document/field/document/id/50454](http://www.politikerscreen.de/index.php/Common/Document/field/document/id/50454)