

## European Workshop

### **Social Firms in North Rhine-Westphalia – Creating Opportunities for Disadvantaged People**

From Tuesday, 17 February to Thursday, 19 February in NRW, Germany

As part of the European Study visits organised by the development partnership “Strategies for the Future – Development of Social Firms in North Rhine-Westphalia”, a workshop was held for national and European participants. This activity falls into the thematic field 3: Interaction between experts and systems to improve general conditions and quality and to promote strategies for better access to work.

Pursuant to the thematic field 3 and according to the Transnational Co-operation Agreement (TCA) as concluded by the European development partnership “Le Mat”, the study visits are organised in European partner countries. During the study visits, the representatives of the participating countries’ social economy (e.g. employees, managers, consultants, experts) took the opportunity to intensively exchange their views while visiting companies, listening to presentations, and taking part in working groups and discussions. The goal was to learn about the particular situation in the partner countries and to identify and communicate best practice solutions. To document this exchange process, interviews were done with the guests as well as with the employees of the social firms.

The conference was attended by delegates from several European countries (Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and Sweden; the project partners from Greece unfortunately had to cancel their participation on short notice). The first day started on 17 February 2004 with a presentation by Mr Peter Stadler, Managing Director of *FAF gGmbH*. His presentation with the title “The Impact of Social Firms on Disadvantaged People, especially on People with Disabilities” dealt with the particular conditions for the inclusion of disadvantaged and especially severely handicapped people at the workplace in Germany.

The delegates then went to see the integration firm *Die Kette (The Chain)*. The visit started with a lunch in one of the company’s canteens. After the *Kette’s* business manager Christoph Rohm had introduced his company to the participants, the visitors split up in small groups to see different operating sites of the company.

One group stayed on site and took a tour of the canteen and the kiosk of the *Rhenish Hospital* at Cologne-Merheim. They also learned about the hospital’s facilities. Another group went to a canteen in the local tax and revenue office in the city of Bergisch-Gladbach, while the third group saw the *Kette’s* catering facility in Rösrath, another small city near Cologne. Yet another group visited the industrial assembly of the *Kette*.

In the evening, all participants had the chance to take part in a walk in the city centre of Cologne. The guests learned about the city’s history, and were quite impressed by the Cologne Cathedral, the traces of the Romans, the Rhine river and the bronze statues of the folklore city characters *Tünnes and Schäl*. The day ended in a typical Cologne-style tavern, the brewhouse *Früh* near the Cathedral, where local food and *Kölsch* (Cologne’s very own kind of beer) was served.

On Wednesday, 18 February 2004 the participants of the study visits heard a presentation by Dr Helga Seel, Director of the *Integration Office Rhineland*. She described how the inclusion of severely handicapped people at the workplace is supported in Germany and explained that German integration projects were a special case in Europe, as these projects are legally funded according to Volume IX of the German Social Code. She described the structure and aims of these projects and their significance to severely handicapped people in North Rhine-Westphalia. Dr Seel also elaborated on the importance of the development partnership “Strategies for the Future” for the integration offices in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Unfortunately, that morning was overshadowed by an organisational mishap. We had obviously misinterpreted our previous experiences with visitor groups at the BTZ (Vocational Training Center of Cologne), including wheelchair users, since we mistakingly assumed that surmounting the six steps to the conference room with the help of experienced BTZ employees could be a suitable solution to this accessibility problem.

We had not chosen the BTZ as that morning’s conference room without a good reason, as the centre organises vocational trainings primarily for people with mental disabilities. We thus felt it was important for our European visitors to be given an insight into the respective facilities.

We deeply regret the fact that we misjudged the situation and that we could not hear and discuss Mr Giampiero Griffo’s contribution, as he was unable to surmount the steps to the foyer of the conference room. This was a great loss for all participants, for Giampiero Griffo is the President of *Disabled Peoples’ International – Europe*, and listening to his presentation on the struggle for equality for people with disabilities would have been very valuable for all participants. Due to this incident we further increased our awareness for the needs of wheelchair users and will do our very best to ensure that at future events there will be no such barriers for people needing a mobility aid.

After the opening speech held by Dr Seel, several delegates took the occasion to interview her and to learn more about how the employment of severely handicapped people in Germany is organised and co-funded. The discussion focussed mainly on recruitment and training of severely handicapped people employed in integration firms, and the participants noted some of the differences applying in the European partners’ countries.

Meanwhile, a first group of participants went on to do study visits with various gardening companies in North Rhine-Westphalia, the first of which was the integration firm *Jaider* in Solingen. Tobias Borrmann introduced the group to his gardening and landscaping company which primarily employs people with mental illnesses or addictive diseases. The company also offers qualifications for long-term unemployed to re-enter the ‘first’ (non-subsidised) job market. Similarly, Jörg Kraner introduced his gardening company *Garbe gGmbH* based in Velbert.

After an abundant lunch the participants planned to visit the social firm *Grünbau*, a social job creation company devoted to qualification and education of long-term unemployed. But due to a car breakdown this visit could not take place. However, Michael Stober and Angelika Wirth of *Grünbau* were willing to offer another appointment on Friday, 20 February 2004, which some delegates were happy to attend.

By visiting the gardening companies, the participants had the chance to directly compare several social firms of the same business sector and to get to know the characteristics of their specific target groups.

The group of participants who did not wish to see the gardening companies went to visit a vocational training centre in Cologne. The group was welcomed by the director, Christine Haerlin, who explained the institution's concept and then guided the group on a tour of the house. The group then split up in two parts to see other social firms in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Group 2 visited the hotel and conference centre *FIT* in Much which, in two ways, is oriented on the needs of severely handicapped people. Thanks to its barrier-free interior, this integration firm is not only accessible as a hotel and conference centre to people with disabilities who are consequently one of the company's customer groups, but it also offers jobs for severely handicapped people. The group enjoyed the fine cuisine of the conference centre and was then taken on a tour of the house by its director Martin Bünk. As some of the participants are currently planning to set up a barrier-free hotel in Italy by applying a concept of social franchising, an interesting and in-depth discussion developed.

Group 3 went to visit the association *Maßstab e.V.* in Cologne. This association is a facility for the rehabilitation of ex-prisoners and is primarily devoted to helping its clients find jobs. To this end, the social firm of *Maßstab* offers various training schemes, qualifications, or even permanent jobs. There is a wide variety of jobs offered by this social firm, ranging from technical shop floors to the restaurant *Malve*. Mathias Remky, *Maßstab's* managing director, welcomed the visitors and explained the social firm's business. The visitors were then introduced to a group of adolescents, living together in a housing project. For them, this was an alternative to being sent to jail. The old building renovated by the young people was a good example for the workmanship carried out at *Maßstab*. The visit ended with a dinner at the *Maßstab's* restaurant *Malve*.

The study visits on that day were followed by the transnational working group I: Recruitment and Training. The working group discussed their previous results and agreed on future tasks. A follow-up meeting was scheduled for 12 – 15 May in Sweden.

All delegates met again that evening in Cologne to take part in an event in the restaurant *Malve*. They were joined by the managers of the businesses visited as well as by other experts and representatives of politics and public administration to discuss and exchange their views.

The discussion focussed mainly on the funding of German integration firms in line with Volume IX of the German Social Code and the question on how this funding could be a model for the inclusion of other groups of disadvantaged people at the workplace.

On Thursday, 19 February, the last day of the workshop, the participants gathered in the morning to reflect upon and assess the study visits. An exchange of experiences between the participants was recorded as part of the concomitant national and transnational evaluation.

There was also another meeting that morning of working group I: Recruitment and Training. Various interviews were discussed on this occasion.

The conference ended by familiarising all participants with the typical customs and ceremonies of the Carnival of Cologne, a folk festival which started on that very day. The group then went on to experience this traditional festival in the pubs and streets of Cologne...