

Interview with the Project Coordinator - Sérgio Aires

This is the first of a series of interviews with all Bridges for Inclusion partners.

We're starting with our Project Coordinator, who shared some his views with us about the project itself and its great challenges in building bridges between employment and social inclusion policies.

1. What was your first motivation to get the idea for this project started?

The first and most important motivation for this project was the opportunity given by the European PROGRESS Programme. When we saw that in the framework of this programme it was possible (by promoting mutual learning and in the context of the new Active Inclusion approach) to analyse and generate ideas and experiences of connecting employment and inclusion we immediately decided to go forward. For long years that we believe that the bridges between these two strategies are not producing the expected results. The employment strategies, although capable of promoting more labour market opportunities, are sometimes miles away of being able to promote the inclusion of those people living in the most difficult and extreme situations of poverty and social exclusion. On the other hand, some of the inclusion and anti-poverty policies are not designed or implemented in a way that allows that an approach to the labour market becomes possible and realist.

2. Which are the key-factors for the success of this project?

Like in every project with the nature of BFI (European funding, transnational activities, two years, different kinds of activities, and a large number of actors involved at the national level&) the most important key-factor for its success is the quality of the partners and their involvement in the project activities. I believe this project is strongly built upon a high level partnership in terms of experience, motivation and heterogeneity. We have six countries (two from the southern Europe, two from central Europe and two from Eastern Europe), whose organisations make part of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) family and we count with the active participation of one of the most experienced organisations in the world concerning the argument employment-inclusion: the International Labour Office (Geneva). If I have to underline one of the most important factors for the global success of this project I would say the possibility to identify and disseminate recommendations (based on concrete experiences) of bridging employment and inclusion trough social economy initiatives. This corresponds to the final product of the project: a road map (I would prefer to call a GPS since in a GPS we have different alternatives&) where well try precisely to enhance these different bridges for successful inclusion of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

3. What are the main difficulties and challenges you have encountered so far and those you are expecting to face? How do you think we can meet them?

We are at the very beginning of the project, therefore so far, so good! All the partners are very motivated and excited with the project and its goals. A part from the normal difficulties run a project with different national contexts, languages, territorial organisation and approaches, cultural policy differences and heterogeneity of experience, the biggest challenge in my opinion will be to make different policies and organisations recognise their failure in producing inclusion through the present employment strategies and the other way around. It's never easy to recognise failure and this will be an enormous challenge. However by producing a first European overview about the bridges (or the lack of bridges) between employment and inclusion and national participated researches about the same issue, I believe we will overcome this difficulty. In the end, and taking in consideration the recognition of the importance of this project (also by the European Commission), we feel that everyone knows that something must change to produce the expected results. Another parallel difficulty will be to prove (and this is an objective of the project) that social economy can be a strong and successful leader on these matters. Normally social economy plays the role of implementing the policies but is not directly involved on their definition and evaluation. To show this can be made in a different way will also be an important challenge but I count with the big potential and experience of all the partners to overcome with great success this difficulty.

4. Talking about your country policy, could you illustrate the current situation in your country concerning the link between the employment and social inclusion models?

Well, I can only give some impressions since a more accurate vision will come precisely from the research well produce at the national level in the framework of this project. However and keeping it as an impressionist vision, in Portugal - concerning the main objective of this project - we are not facing a very different situation in comparison with other EU member states. The only and relevant difference is that we have a higher number of people at risk of poverty (18% in 2006 almost 10% of the overall population) and between these persons a considerable number of working poor. That's why Portugal faces an even more difficult challenge concerning the bridges between employment and inclusion. Portugal represents one of those countries where it is very clear that employment is not avoiding people to continue to live below the poverty line. If we take in consideration the very low levels of qualification and education of the Portuguese population in general we can already have a picture of how difficult the situation is. During the 90s (particularly after 1997) a so called new generation of social policies was born and some of them (Guaranteed Minimum Income, Employment Social Market, Social Enterprises, Micro-Credit&) started a process where it precisely underlined the necessary connections between employment and inclusion strategies, actions and actors. Some of these policies, in the very beginning started to produce modest but interesting and successful results. However and mainly because of political changes (since 1974 Portugal had 17 governments!) these policies started to lose their initial track and some of them lost completely their initial background and intentions. I believe that to produce a more decisive impact on poverty is necessary not only to promote new policies but to change the cultural paradigm of the social intervention in Portugal. We still live in an assistencialist paradigm where poverty and its structural causes are not well known or ignored. We still have a very individually focused approach concerning the causes of poverty. Therefore I believe we need an important social-cultural change and this must imply all the actors. A change in the policies will not produce effective results when the actors don't understand it or, in the limit, resist to its implementation because they mean a revolution in their way to see the world their living&

5. What is the role or contribution that organizations from the social economy have in promoting the social inclusion in your country?

To start, in Portugal is already quite hard to say and distinguish what are social economy organisations and what are social protection organisations. By a long tradition, directly connect with the Catholic Church, most of the social organisations play a role of providing different basic services and social support actions (more than 70% of the social services are being provided by private social solidarity organisations in the framework of contracts signed with the central state). Therefore an important part of these organisations are exactly only service providers and they don't have a more global social economy or fight against poverty mission / approach in their genetic code. Since 1997, and in consequence of the new generation of social policies, the project approach (based on national but also European programmes and projects), the more transversal and partnership strategic vision and also because of the influence of the European winds some NGOs started to develop a more focused approach on social economical actions. Since then, and also in consequence of some particular policy measures (Employment Social Market and Micro-credit), a new institutional framework was born and we can today recognise that an important number of new (or reborn) organisations can be called, what in a general is called social economy organisations / initiatives. I strongly believe that by the importance of the traditional approach of social services being provided by social solidarity organisations, very close to the local level and to the local realities Portugal has an institutional tissue that can be potentialized towards a strong and very capable social economy. Of course that for this to happen we need to be more effective on: decentralising the social services in terms of definition and evaluation of the policies; better networking between the different actors and at different levels; distinguish what is providing basic services for all citizens and what is providing particular services for people experiencing poverty having as objective its eradication; a better well-know based approach in terms of conceptualization of the policies; a deeper, transversal and consensus knowledge about what poverty and fighting poverty means and, last but not least, a realistic implementation of the policies meaning that in most of the cases when we try to cross employment and inclusion this only can be made step-by-step, recognising failures, changing procedures, evaluating& and sometimes these is not compatible with the political agenda&

Thank you Sérgio!