

**1<sup>st</sup> meeting of the European Integration Network**  
**11 and 12 October 2016**  
**Brussels**

This was the 1<sup>st</sup> meeting of the European Integration Network, whose establishment was announced in the Commission's [Action plan](#) on the integration of third country nationals adopted on 7 June. Most of the EIN representatives used to take part in the EIN's forerunner, the network of National Contact Points on Integration.

The meeting was structured around workshop discussions. EIN members were able to choose to attend two out of three parallel sessions. They were on the following areas: **Integration through sport and culture**, **Promoting diversity and combating discrimination** and **Increased participation in local government structures**.

**A. Integration through sport and culture**



[Cinemaximilien](#) is a volunteer-run project that began last year when large numbers of asylum seekers were camped in parc Maximilien in the centre of Brussels waiting for their asylum procedures to start. Two committed individuals set up cinema screenings to give people something to do. It has now been expanded to debates, film screenings in Brussels and in Belgium, art exhibitions and musical events. The aim is to build bridges between the host society and refugees.

[Les Gazelles de Bruxelles](#) is a volunteer-run jogging group that started spontaneously because people wanted to take part in the Brussels 20K running race. They offer training sessions twice a week to give them the opportunity to train together and to train for running competitions if they so wish. The group is primarily made up of migrants but also of other people with a disadvantaged background.

During the discussions, it emerged that art and sport are often seen as secondary needs in terms of integration measures that are put in place. People think first of food, a bed and access to jobs. But from the experience of the two projects, there is not only a major need for sport and culture but also a lot of interest from third-country nationals. Many migrants have artistic backgrounds. These sorts of projects are very good entry points for integration to start, giving refugees and asylum seekers the chance to meet local people, to build friendships and to find work.



Another issue addressed by these kinds of projects is that people waiting in asylum centres are often bored and may become depressed over time. Having an activity to be involved in gives them motivation and enables them to get through difficult moments and avoid depression.

The EU can provide funding to help but also support the dissemination of the practices. Sweden, Germany and the US have similar initiatives to Les Gazelles. During the debate, the Commission and other public authorities were invited to look at barriers that we have in different parts of society that we might not recognise (e.g. official sports clubs with relatively high fees and a 'non-diverse' membership base), and to see what can be changed in terms of this access issue.

## **B. Promoting diversity and combating discrimination**

[UNIA](#) is fighting discrimination in all its forms. One of its key activities is to deal with complaints about discrimination. After receiving such complaints, it tries to find mediation solutions (e.g. via lawyers) before going to court if necessary. It collects data on discrimination and provides recommendations to federal government. It also launches awareness campaigns (e.g. via movies or beer mats with wording such as "XXXX' discrimination").

The [regional centre for integration](#) is a secondary line of integration. It acts as a resource provider to local authorities who are primarily responsible for integration. It provides social services, gathers data and supports an integration path that all migrants have to follow. It also visits schools to raise awareness among children and provides training about immigration history (e.g. Italians who came in large numbers in the past).



Key questions included: What about discrimination between migrant groups? How to engage with the local population? How to deal with different cultures (e.g. in schools and hospitals)? How to foster the training of professionals?

Referring to the EU legal requirement for Member States to have equality bodies, Belinda Pyke stressed how important it is for EIN members to develop links with

them if they are not familiar with them. Diversity charters are also very important in this area.

## **C. Increased participation in local government structures**

The [Minderhedenforum](#) (Minorities Forum) is an umbrella organisation of 1,800 organisations recognised by the Flemish government. It tries to empower migrants to take part in advisory councils and to be involved in other forms of participation.

Its 'changemakers' project, which receives money from the EU integration fund, aims to train and coach young migrants to take part in different forms of participation. A hundred young people are still active in different forms of participation.



The main challenges for this kind of organisation include having to represent a lot of nationalities, excessive pressure on volunteers and the issues of populism and racism.

A key point to emerge was that people have a right to participate but, for that to happen, confidence, trust and a sense of belonging have to be created. For example, there is a shortage of teachers and police officers with a migrant background because of a lack of confidence.



To conclude the day's proceedings, the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong learning (EARALL) presented a **refugee integration project run by the Swedish Västra Götaland region**. This included a **testimony by a former refugee, Adnan Abdul Ghani**.

A Syrian former computer engineer, Mr Ghani arrived in Sweden two years ago at the country's biggest asylum camp.

Whilst refugees are relieved at reaching safety when they first arrive, the hope gives way to depression and even anger when the asylum process drags on and they realise that their skills are deteriorating. Engineers, doctors, teachers, carpenters and plumbers end up sitting in their rooms depressed.

That is why a Support Group Network was set up. The aim is for them to have "activities (e.g. children's clubs, sports clubs etc.) for a meaningful waiting time". The activities encourage self-empowerment and mobilisation and ensure that people do not lose their skills, shifting people's mindset from a 'victim approach' to a 'competence approach'.

The Support Group also uses a network of volunteers to find internships for other refugees in the cities, which has led to 40 jobs. This means the refugees pay taxes while they are in the refugee camps. In 2015, the Support Group created over 900 activities. It also set up job fairs for engineer refugees and companies. 18 job opportunities came out of that. In addition, refugees have become teachers in schools. Even if the asylum seekers end up being sent back to their home country they will have gained valuable experience in the workplace and in society.

Mr Ghani is now working in 16 asylum camps doing a similar thing.

The possibility of including a visit for EIN members to this centre is considered within the framework of a study visit to Sweden in 2017.

On the second day of the meeting, EIN members visited Convivial, a refugee support organisation in Forest, Brussels, and Bon, an integration agency in Molenbeek, Brussels.

### Convivial, the refugee support organisation

Convivial was set up following the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s. Belgians housed Rwandan asylum seekers, helped them with asylum procedures and helped them find homes and jobs. Once the Rwandans had settled, they also invested in Convivial. A key specificity of the centre is that it was co-created by Belgians and Rwandans and this Belgian-Rwandan cooperation continues. One of the Rwandans working at the centre is Jean Bosco, who is a Belgian citizen now. He is the head of individual guidance towards social and professional integration.



In all, there are around 70-80 workers (including a core team of 35 long term workers skilled in social issues), and about 20 volunteers with different profiles (e.g. top managers giving help with training).

The organisation works individually with refugees building their confidence and giving them opportunities to get involved in society. In addition, it works collectively via training and groups where refugees can share experiences.

The three main areas of work of Convivial are the following:

- Settlement (once the asylum seeker has been officially recognised as a refugee): first three to six months. The housing department helps them find housing and to deal with landlords. Convivial has a loan fund so that refugees can pay their first housing payment on time and maintains long term contact with landlords to overcome any prejudices they may have towards refugees. The organisation also collects furniture from donors and provides that to refugees. Refugees are helped with activities such as opening a bank account, seeing local authorities and finding a school for their children.
- Insertion (once they have a home). The organisation offers individual guidance/mentoring. This can involve finding training to gain Belgian recognition of their experience or working to have their qualifications recognised in Belgium. There is also collective training (e.g. citizenship classes to help them understand Belgian values and how the healthcare and education systems work), computer training (internet, email use) and French classes. The centre also offers practical job-related training such as a four month basic carpentry course. This can lead to further more specialist courses such as interior decorating or old furniture repair. The main aim is to help refugees start their new lives. It is important to help them find an orientation quickly and be active.
- Raising awareness. The centre gives Belgian locals the opportunity to meet refugees and vice versa so that they can share stories. Due to the Syrian crisis, there is now more awareness of refugees in Belgium and there is huge demand from civil society to do things to help. So Convivial helps develop local social solidarity (e.g. a local driving a refugee far from the city centre to the city centre to go to a local authority).

The focus is on refugees (not migrants). Around 60-65% of asylum seekers are currently being granted protection.

## Bon, the integration agency

Bon is an agency of integration and citizenship with four local offices and around 100 multilingual employees. The main target group is adult newcomers but it also caters for people who have been in Brussels for a while ('oldcomers') and newcomers who are minors.

The first thing the agency does when migrants arrive is to test their cognitive skills to determine their level of education. They then sign a mutual commitment contract regarding the programme. In 2015, 13,500 new contracts were signed in Flanders. 3,500 contracts were signed in Brussels.

Its integration programme for migrants is based on:

A social/civic orientation course: The five week civic orientation course is done in the migrant's language to facilitate them absorbing lots of new information. The main goal is to enable migrants to acquire knowledge about how things work in Belgium.

A language course (elementary Dutch): The length of it depends on the individual.

Individual guidance: Key element of success. The guidance focuses on empowering the migrants so that they are able to resolve their problems themselves.

Career orientation – relating to jobs, education and leisure time: This is done from a professional perspective, educational perspective and diploma recognition and socio-cultural perspective.

A new effort offering opportunities for dialogue between Brussels locals and newcomers is ongoing. A caravan is the space for the dialogue. The agency has people trained in how to start a dialogue between people who don't know each other. The person invites locals off the street for a coffee and a chat. The newcomers come from the agency's programmes.



Among its projects, there is a project on diploma recognition; a programme based on civic integration and a Dutch course for youngsters who need to learn to be independent (e.g. teaching them practical things such as how to cook); and MindSpring - a service where another trainer (trained by psychologists) is called on to identify major problem (mainly mental health problems related to traumatic experiences) that refugees are

suffering from and enables them to discuss these openly. The agency holds around four or five group sessions to identify the problems. It enables the migrants to feel comfortable enough to talk about the traumas that they have endured in their home country. This has had a big impact.

Where the agency is not the right place to help the migrant, it sends them to the right place (e.g. to Actiris for employment-related issues).

The agency helps around 3,500 people per year. The clients usually come to Bon by word of mouth.

## Some key lessons learnt

**Culture** (e.g. the volunteer-run cinema group Cinemaximilien) and **sport** (e.g. the jogging group called Les Gazelles) are **very good entry points for integration** to start, giving refugees and asylum seekers the chance to meet local people, to build friendships and to find work.

Increased participation in local government structures: People have a right to participate but will only do so fully once **confidence, trust and a sense of belonging** have been created. For example, there is a shortage of teachers and police officers with a migrant background because of a lack of confidence.

It is important for asylum seekers and refugees not to get bored while in centres but to remain active and to keep practising their skills. The concept of **self-empowerment** is key, shifting people's mindset from a 'victim approach' to a 'competence approach'.

Holding **courses** about subjects (e.g. civic orientation) **in the migrant's language** helps ensure they acquire the skills that they need.

**Individual guidance** is a key element of successful integration.

**Involving refugees** in the work of a migrant centre or support organisation helps them to keep busy, acquire skills and learn about the host country and offers migrants the chance to discuss their issues with people who have had similar experiences.

Public administrations could look into **barriers to entry into organisations** (e.g. sports clubs), identify these and suggest steps to make the organisations more inclusive to refugees/migrants.