

## **M2M Project, Report of Mechelen Meeting, Belgium, 9 & 10<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

### **1. What kind of society do we want?**

I must admit that I found surprising the social economy restaurant in Brussels. But I found this interesting as it can be in a way considered as a paradigm of the evolutions of our society. In a first approach, you wonder what means social in that context. Is it that it is reserved to a certain category of clients? Have we been allowed to eat there under visiting conditions? No, because nobody was surprised to see us, we were normal clients, similar to the green collars working in the several NGO of the neighbourhood. The prices in fact were standards for the food served, no more than 10% higher than a popular place for equivalent food. Food is not less expensive, and the people who work there do not seem to face more difficulties than the workers in a popular restaurant. What is different? The way we consider them? Or the way they want to be considered? The size of the toilets and their cleanness is different. But the food is not better and the relations between workers is standardized, the same as the relation they may have with the clients. I cannot not make the parallel with the small places, popular bars and restaurants that are closing each month in every city. Places that were probably the real social economy places in towns. They welcome a variety of clients who can spend some time there, being sure to be able to talk to someone. Prices are low because clients belong to the working classes. The employees also may be different but are able to provide a good quality of food and service. The managers knew how to integrate both the employee and the client and both could learn by spending time there. These were social places managed by social persons for social clients.

### **2. Work-up Brussels**

It is always difficult to comment after a quick presentation and a few questions on an interesting project like Work-up Brussels that would require much more attention and time for analysis but also the meeting of other stakeholders and moreover the people who are benefiting from the support. *Work-up Brussels* gathers organisations of ethnic minority and in partnership with *Tracé Brussels*, an organisation that support job seekers, employs a social worker to provide an adapted guidance to unemployed persons belonging to ethnic minority groups. What I appreciate is that the promoters stressed that time is needed and that a lot of additional support is necessary to improve the access to work of minorities. My first reaction has been: so much effort, so many people involved and such a constructive cooperation for so little results. Hopefully I almost immediately said to myself: you are stupid to think like this, you know how difficult it is, you know how every result is important, you know that you don't have to take into account only the quantitative data, and regarding them, that a little increase of a percentage is already a valuable result. It is an experience for which I regret to only get a taste. I would like to participate to other moments, like an interview of the social worker with a job seeker, a meeting of the steering committee, a discussion with job seekers. For the moment, I will enquire if such initiatives exist in my country and how can I know more about it.

### **3. Migrant's experience**

On Thursday evening (October 9, 2008) two speakers: AY and AD have reported their arrival and journey to Belgium.

AY is the first to speak. He comes from Iran where he worked as a doctor. Following a political difference and an inability to express his opinions, he has come to settle in Belgium. His son came with him while his wife remained in Iran. The choice of Belgium was not a random choice. He had a positive image of the country and thought that it would be easy for him to get political asylum. He explains that he has been in Belgium for 7 years and still has no identity papers from Belgium. He is waiting and anxious. He lives in a precarious situation. His son goes to school and has obtained Belgian nationality.

AY can not find a real job regarding his situation. Sometimes he has to do small jobs in an illegal framework (without work contract). He is aware but he has no choice if he wants to meet his most

vital needs.

AY emphasizes the importance of associations, such as CIMIC, which help and accompany migrants in their efforts to integrate society. These activities enable him to have social relations and keeping hope. He could benefit from a computer training scheme.

AY fears of being expelled. He sometimes wondered if it would be better to return to Iran. But Iran is not anymore his country. It has no national identity. Until he has not his Belgian identity papers, he can not feel accepted in the host country. For now, home is nowhere.

AD is from Ukraine where she was a nuclear engineer. With the USSR breakdown, the economic situation of his country was complicated. After the death of her husband, she chose to come to Belgium with her two children. Like all expatriates, she had great illusions; she thought that all would be better, she was fleeing poverty for prosperity. But this was not the case. She thought that she could find work easily because of her degree. But very quickly, she dropped her optimism. She first met the language barrier, then the difficulty to get her diploma recognized by the Belgian authorities. She spent 8 years in an illegal situation and was therefore unable to seek recognized employment. Today, she works, her children too. She often speaks to people without papers to give them hope and help them in supporting the experience she had to endure herself.

Both testimonials very rich and full of humanity confront us to everyday of ordinary people who have suffered from national policies. They are therefore in an unknown nation facing great precariousness and a lack of control over the situation. These testimonials illustrate the anxiety of waiting and powerlessness. They also underline the importance of associations that help migrants without papers to keep hope. These testimonials show that nobody is safe from a suffered expatriation and help to relativize a number of events in our lives.