

# How to empower?

A practical guidebook for the implementation of empowerment and exchange projects at the example of the project ESOP (European Structural Orientation Program for migrants)

Implementente by:





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# Guide for the implementation of empowerment and intercultural exchange projects

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#### Preamble:

The European Structural Orientation Program for migrants - ESOP

(http://www.universointerculturale.it/esop-for-migrants) was launched in November 2016 by Associazione Interculturale UNIVERSO in Bologna. UNIVERSO is a non-profit organization founded in 2002 by a group of students and workers, both Italians and foreigners living in Bologna but far from home, with the aim of promoting and supporting social initiatives alongside motivating and facilitating mutual understanding between people from different cultures and origins.

In 2017, Migration\_miteinander (<u>http://en.migrationmiteinander.de/en/home-eng</u>), a German-Italian association, joined UNIVERSO in the launching and implementation of the second and third edition of the program. Migration\_miteinander was founded in April 2017 by a group of young professionals united by the objective of making a change in their society and speaking up for a Europe that is based on solidarity and mutual support. The association's main objectives are to promote European mobility not only for Europeans but also for migrants regularly residing in Europe and to prepare young people for an Active Citizenship in the European context.

## I. Exemplary project: ESOP (European Structural Orientation Program for migrants)

The following toolkit is based on the experiences developed during the empowerment exchange project ESOP. The first edition was launched and implemented in November 2016 and by 2018, we have successfully realised a third edition.

ESOP is an empowerment exchange program for a group of selected participants; 15 non EU nationals/migrants resident in Italy and 15 EU interns and volunteers, offering a platform for dialogue while providing the necessary orientation towards a more inclusive life in the European context. Mutual learning from one another and continuous exchange in dialogue characterize all ESOP activities. Migrants taking part in the program, alongside EU interns representing the host society, are preparing for active integration into diverse societies. This implies not only promoting proper communication, intercultural mediation, literacy skills, orientation and information for migrants, but also strengthening their active European citizenship and participation.



On the one hand, ESOP's program units focus on Italian language classes (for the first two cycles there were also classes of German as a second language), introduction to IT, active (European) citizenship education, legal training (both national and European framework) and preparation for Europe's labor market. On the other hand, through seminars and trainings, interns and volunteers are skilled-up towards intercultural communication in sociocultural integration. The formative part is completed by different

intercultural exchange activities for all participants of the program to promote peer-to-peer approach and mutual learning. Intercultural events (intercultural dinners, discussions, dance events) are organized during the program by the ESOP team in Bologna, bringing together migrants and autochthons, to make possible encounters based on mutual respect and interest in getting to know each other. They are a good opportunity for the migrant participants to present themselves to the Bolognese society.

The program is not only implemented on a national level, enhancing exchange with the local population, but follows a European approach based on the principles of solidarity and freedom of mobility. It, therefore, can be replicated in any EU society.

#### II. Methods and techniques

Our practical tips, which contain concrete exemplary methods and strategies for empowerment and training, depend on the chosen target group and the characteristics of the respective group of participants as ESOP's general framework takes diversity into account. We consciously chose a replicable structure and approach that can easily be adapted to other EU contexts and settings.

#### A. Empowerment

ESOP acts in the promotion of active integration and social cohesion through the empowerment of migrants and the European host society. Through ESOP, migrants receive the necessary instruments to shape their lives actively and to become participating and contributing members of the host society instead of finding themselves in a state of passivity.

#### 1. How to empower?

ESOP focuses on two complex factors to be able to effectively talk about empowerment: consciousness and patience. <u>Consciousness</u>: each participant elaborates on her/his personal motivation for being a member of a team and how to (re-)define 'help' from (often) a concept of doing things for the other as to guiding the other in doing it on her/his own.

e.g I have independently chosen to be a member of a team, therefore my point of view must be shared with my team. <u>Patience</u>: the ability to recalculate objectives requires a gradual and often time-consuming process. Giving the space to people to (re-)discover and develop their capacities instead of "quickly doing it for them" requests plenty of patience and self-discipline.

e.g My team needs to print a flyer. I have to consequently share my digital skills with my team, even though it would take up some of my time before I create the flyer.

In the case of asylum seekers as participants, it's important to be aware of the field of tension they are exposed to: European asylum systems tend to push asylum seekers into a passive role, make decisions for them and oppress their autonomy. Thus, participating in a program that all of a sudden requests their active participation and contributions can lead to team frustration. Only clearly addressing and discussing these facts can help them to be able to proceed in a serene atmosphere.

#### Practical tip:

- At the beginning of the program, a training with the interns, based on their expectations and motivations for joining, can be very helpful for detecting a possible "helper syndrome" and for having a group discussion about the concept of empowerment through short role play activities ("Support in filling out a job application → how do you proceed?"...)
- Organize an encounter with a former participant to sensitize the European volunteers and interns to the role of the asylum seekers and characteristics of their daily life in the host society.

#### 2. Involvement of former participants

Every cycle of ESOP lasts round about 6 months and is done with one fix groups of participants. From the 2nd cycle of the project, former European interns, volunteers and former migrants participants switched their roles and joined the coordination team. Having a group of young people, who have already experienced the implementation of an empowerment project and who share the chosen approach, is a clear contribution to an empowerment and exchange project such as ESOP and remarkably helps to increase quality.

#### a) Coordination team



The ESOP team is composed of a multinational coordination team of five members . They are all former participants and thus have precious experience in the project's approach. The coordination team is responsible for the organizational framework during the whole cycle and thus assumes tasks such as dissemination, selection of interviews, organization of the preparatory weeks and the formative part, evaluation and monitoring.

b) Training activities Besides the involvement in the coordination team, further participants can take the role of trainers. This kind of responsibility can range from taking over or assisting in a whole program unit to being responsible for single workshops. Testimonies of former participants presenting their experiences after ESOP and talking about new opportunities in their lives are interesting as well.



The presence of former migrant participants in the coordination team and among the trainer had a very positive impact: Switching from the participants into an expert and leader role is an important act of acknowledging increasing autonomy and orientation, and confirms the possession of new instruments and skills thanks to ESOP. As a result of this experience, the participants gained new skills such as team management, guidance, didactic skills. Furthermore, for current migrant participants, to see other migrants in these roles is inspiring and increases their trust in the project. ESOP's migrant coordinators often have a higher sensitivity to the needs of the migrant participants, hence their closeness to the target group.

It is important, however, that not every migrant participant (and same is valid for the European interns and volunteers) is appropriate for such a role. In order to avoid damages for the program and for the persons involved, the selection of responsibilities shall be done duefully and the necessary guidance during implementation (plus an initial training at the beginning of the project) shall be given.

Practical tip:

• To keep the coordination team together and to ensure that the project is implemented following its principles, it's recommended to meet at least once per month within the coordination team.

# 3. Constitution of the participants team

The constitution of the participants team (migrants and young Europeans) is fundamental for the successful implementation of the project. The creation of a diverse group with different needs and competences is the basis for a fruitful exchange and a peer-to-peer learning.

# a) Dissemination

The coordination team is responsible for the dissemination of the program. In the case of ESOP, dissemination is done through traditional flyering and by using social media. However, in many cases, the most important is mouth-to-mouth propaganda done by former participants as it makes it possible to reach people that otherwise would not have been reached or wouldn't have taken the decision to apply.

Given that the target group of the dissemination material is represented by future participants (and not social workers etc.), it should be available in the language of the host country and at least in English and another important language of the migrant community so that possible candidates can gain information autonomously.

Another useful tool is the organization of an information evening that gives enquirers the possibility to ask questions and to learn more about the program.

The experience of the former participants is a crucial component during the dissemination period. The diversity of the selection group provides an easier access to the potential candidates.

# Practical tip:

• Short video clips made in the most important languages of asylum seekers, in which former participants present the program, create additional trust and also give information to those people that don't have a high level of reading skills (yet). They can be published on Facebook and, more importantly, used for dissemination on Whats App.



# b) Selection interviews

The main objective of the selection interviews is to have an open application process in which potential candidates are welcomed to fill in the application form personally. This gives a first idea of the level of their comprehension and confirms the empowerment approach. The selection interviews then are done by two members of the coordination team. The presence of migrants in the team is a fundamental asset for the interviews and reduces the risk of potential cultural misunderstandings.

The following points should be taken into account for the implementation of an empowerment and exchange program such as ESOP:

- language skills (at least one of the defined languages of communication needs to be spoken to make active participation possible from the beginning)

- need for orientation
- motivation to contribute and to participate in activities of intercultural exchange
- necessary time capacities for the whole duration of the project
- same age range for European volunteers and interns

A diverse team of individuals with different needs and competences, each of them having different cultural backgrounds and gender balance are essential. But for the constitution of the final team of participants, it should also be taken into consideration that for different reasons (change of residence, finding a job, participation in other projects...) not all the participants will stay until the end of the project. Experience shows that from the very beginning of the project, some people tend not to show up. To be able to implement the project with the desired group size, we recommend to accept at least +25% of the candidates.

The selection process of European interns and volunteers is very similar and focuses on the willingness to get involved in the process of mutual learning.

## Practical tip:

• Following an empowerment approach, the first person of reference should always be the participant herself/ himself. Decisions should be taken with and not about them.

However, we advise not to exclude social workers. They are responsible for the integration process and might supervise other activities designed for the potential participants. If the participants or the coordination team do not communicate their will to take part in the project to the social worker, their efforts will be useless.

#### 4. Needs- based approach: the common definition of project structure

An active involvement of the participants from the very beginning and a needs-based approach should characterize every empowerment project.

## a) Introductory phase

Before the formative part, the introductory phase (1-2 weeks) is an important opportunity to bring all of the participants of the project together (European interns, volunteers and migrant participants) and to prepare them for shared experiences.

(1) The common definition of rules

Laying down the rules together that are valid for the whole period of the project and for all the participants, is one possible activity. The rules should not be imposed by the coordination team but developed together and compromises have to be made.

It's very important that these guidelines are then kept by all participants.

- Practical tip:
  - One topic of relevance is the use of smartphones during the sessions. Small rituals such as collecting the smartphones of all participants (including the European interns and volunteers) at the beginning of the lesson, can be a useful instrument to tackle this topic.

#### (2) Needs analysis

The provision of orientation and developing new skills to the migrant participants for an autonomous life should be the overall aim of empowerment projects. For this reason, a profound needs analysis is fundamental to offer content

that truly satisfies these criteria,. It is important to be aware of the fact that every group of participants is different and that needs and approaches defined for a preceding group might not be appropriate for the current one. At this point, a session on every planned program unit only has to define the general topic in order to collect ideas, questions and knowledge to help the responsible people to prepare a program that reacts to the needs of the group. A possible challenge here is the role of those who want to empower those who have to learn to listen to others instead of imposing their opinion on them.

It has to be clear from the beginning that the migrant participants are the experts of their lives.

# Practical tip:

• Make a round of individual written brainstorming followed by a group brainstorming to collect the ideas and desires of the migrant participants. It's fundamental that before this activity, the respective program unit is presented as clearly as possible to avoid misunderstandings.

## b) During the formative part

Similarly, during the formative part, regular encounters with the migrant participants are fundamental to reflect the realization of the project. They are useful for monitoring the project's implementation and for evaluating the progress that has been made.

Giving voice to individuals that are often not listened to in their daily lives and taking their opinions into consideration are important acts of empowerment. All participants shall be sensitized to the fact that they are part of the project and that they can shape it.

(1) Monthly team meetings with the whole group

Monthly team meetings are good opportunities to talk about how the project implementation is going and how individuals proceed with the project. These kind of meetings are the right moments for the coordination team to discuss practical information and/ or to remind the participants of the project's guidelines.



#### (2) Mid-term evaluation

The mid-term evaluation should go beyond the regular monthly group meetings and at least 4 hours should be dedicated to it.

Similarly to the monthly team meetings, these are important moments to reflect on previous events and to develop solutions for existing problems together and to make proposals for improving the program.

A possible challenge is that giving open and honest feedback might not be natural for many participants for cultural or other reasons. To prevent this, many different methods can be used, including smaller feedback groups (instead of expressing one's opinion in front of the whole group), giving written feedback, using the traffic light method (and other playful techniques).

# Practical tip:

• We recommend a simplified version of the "Future workshop" that stimulates groups to develop proposals for a better project implementation in an assumed world without restrictions.

# B. Characteristics of program units

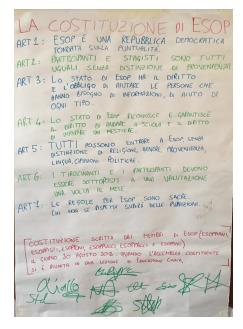
An empowerment program, with the aim of having an impact on its participants' life, shall be structured in a way that permits ongoing adaptation of program components to the needs of the participants.

Furthermore, they can have a stronger empowering effect if active participation is encouraged because the activities ask for the contribution of migrant participants (and European interns and volunteers), for their opinions and for their experiences.

Another didactic instrument with a high potential is elaborating on the content and on the results of the activities of the different program units.

# Practical tip:

Develop your own counter proposals when talking about the current legal framework/codes of conduct. This stimulates creativity and raises awareness to the existing one. For instance, after discussing the Italian Constitution, the migrant participants of ESOP developed one, imagining the project as a state.



C. Resorting to and promoting the resources of the participants

In ESOP, we simultaneously apply a needs-based and resources-based approach since we are aware of the fact that we are working with adults that have already developed important expertises and competences during the course of their life.

The appreciation of one's resources is a fundamental part of an empowerment program. Migrants, asylum seekers in particular, are often not believed to have something to offer that can enrich European cultures. Guiding them in

(re-)discovering their resources increases self-confidence and supports people in building up their future in a new life context based on what they already knew.

Besides promoting individual skills and experiences, the appreciation of cultural diversity is another important characteristic of an empowerment process.

Once again, active listening and activities that require active participation can guide those who empower the participants in understanding their resources and potentials. However, discovering these resources might be challenging as the target group itself might not be aware of possessing them.

# ➤ ♀ Practical tip:

• Simple techniques can help to promote these individual and culture-based resources. These include: - assigning responsibilities to individual participants based on their competences

- activities asking for the participants' experiences (e.g. comparison of different labour market systems etc.)

- organizing intercultural evenings together with contributions of the migrant participants presenting their countries and/or cultures.

-using the linguistic richness of the team: particularly, migrants from Sub Saharan - African countries often speak many languages

#### III. Peer-to-peer exchange between young people with and without refugee background

Besides being an empowerment program, ESOP wants to provide a platform to facilitate (intercultural) exchange between young Europeans and migrants. Combining these aspects in one project proved to bring very promising results and triggered the learning processes not only of the migrant participants but of the European interns, as well. The role of young Europeans (in other empowerment programs it might be young people from the world) can vary from participating in the shared activities to becoming responsible for single program units or assisting in single program units.

One of the objectives of ESOP is to promote mutual learning that is based on a peer-to-peer approach. On the one hand, this has a strong empowering component as the migrant participants are not only put in the role of those who learn but as well of those who teach and react to certain learning needs of the group of Young Europeans. On the other hand, such an approach creates a long-lasting bond between all of the participants of the project.

## A. Training and awareness raising of young locals



The basis for such an exchange at eye level is the ongoing training guidance of young Europeans. These trainings are fundamental to sensitize them to their own learning needs and prepare them for peer-to-peer learning. As a tendency, many young people with interest in the migration sector want to help the target group and are not aware that help in the common sense of the word might not be needed and that they need to learn certain skills themselves.

Preparation before the actual activities with the migrant participants and ongoing accompaniment during the common activities prepare young Europeans for their tasks and sensitizes them to their own learning needs.

1. Preparatory week(s)

This necessary step before the beginning of the program should be done by qualified personnel in order to prepare interns and to give them an insight into

what kind of challenges they might have to face during the program. During these interactive trainings, they might already face intercultural challenges which should equip them with possible problem-solving skills for the future.

2. Ongoing training during the implementation of the formative part

During the implementation of the project, various workshops and further education trainings take place on a regular basis. These are organized by Universo by searching for experts and professionals in the respective areas (nonviolent communication, intercultural training, peaceful conflict negotiation). In the meantime, the trainers pay attention to the relevant experience of the interns in intercultural education.

The workshops enable the interns to acquire the basics of intercultural communication and allows them to deal with various problems in everyday situations. They help them to gain a fundamental understanding of possible complications and potentials while offering ways to handle them.

# Practical tip:

• Supervision sessions with experienced cultural mediators can lead to valuable results and can trigger awareness-rising processes. This can be particularly helpful for the European interns and volunteers that still have to get used to an empowerment and peer-to-peer approach.

## B. Shared trainings or activities for both groups



Besides the trainings for the group of European volunteers and interns, there are trainings and activities for the whole group, including migrant participants. These are fundamental for the peer-to-peer approach, for mutual learning and for getting to know each other.

However, in order to achieve these objectives, it's crucial to choose the right methods with awareness about the diversity of the group and about possible sources of tension.

1. Shared trainings

The shared trainings are often initiated and scheduled by

previous ESOP participants as they already know the target group(s) quite well.

During the trainings participants discuss topics, such as the shaping of an enriching coexistence, migration or gender equality. Problems are presented in the form of role play to help participants recognize problematic situations. These activities also include applying various problem-solving strategies.

A possible challenge is to develop trainings that are appropriate for a very diverse group of participants with different socio-cultural backgrounds and with different levels of education. Codes of conduct have to be taken into account when choosing the right approach for the respective group to avoid frustration and the splitting of the group. The trainers (and facilitators) should pay particular attention to respect the peer-to-peer approach.

## Practical tips:

• We already tried out different types of workshops and trainings and can recommend the following: -creative workshops on migration and diversity such as theatre workshops (The "Forum theater" can be an interesting tool) and handicraft workshops,

-simple simulation games on multiculturalism and intercultural communication (for example "The Derdians").

Besides the creative workshops, basic legal trainings proved to be interesting for all and raised awareness for the legal situation of the migrant participants.

## 2. Shared activities

Shared activities that take place in an informal context are another place for the young participants to come together and to promote peer-to-peer exchange. To ensure that these objectives are achieved and that the activities are implemented at eye level, the guidance through cultural mediators or exchange facilitators is fundamental.



## a) Organization of intercultural events

The ESOP program organizes one intercultural event each month. These events have two main objectives:

- enhancing the group spirit and promoting collaboration as a team of a group of very different young individuals
- creating space for the locals to interact with the migrants participants of the project as active citizens.

Possible challenges include the domination of the European interns in leading positions and different approaches to event management. The presence of cultural mediators during the planning meetings can prevent these problems.

## Practical tip:

• Cooking together is a powerful tool to bring different people together. Cooking dishes from their countries of origin, is an important form of appreciation, particularly for plenty of migrant women.



 "Universo in Gita"- Creating moments to get to know each other at eye level in an informal setting

Every Wednesday morning, we planned different tours in Bologna. In general, the preparation is done by the European interns, still, it is an open program which welcomes ideas from everyone. "Guides" of the respective tours were interns, volunteers or external candidates that shared their knowledge with us. Similarly, the migrant participants were in the role of guides at some tours and shared "their Bologna"- Bologna through the eyes of a migrant - with us.

Also, the participation is based on the idea of an open offer. The excursions vary from getting a first impression of the city, being able to locate the most famous spots of Bologna, to visiting some places outside the city.

The aim of this program is to provide contact and intercultural exchange between interns, participants and citizens from Bologna. This is based on creating opportunities to get to know each other at eye level in an informal setting. People get involved in the life of the city and are given the ability to move around autonomously which supports the general idea of empowerment.

Practical tip: The informality of the setting gives space to getting to know each other but comprises at



the same time the risk of the formation of cliques. Awareness about this tendence, particularly in the team of young European and the integration of group activities in the tours (e.g. games and picnicks) help to prevent this phenomenon.

(2) "Exchange Forum"- Promotion of active intercultural exchange In this program unit, all of the participants define topics of interest for the team- there are no limits in the choice of the topics; from political issues to traditional folklore dance, everything is possible. Small groups or individuals present their topics to the others and then leave time for questions and for exchange and interaction.

The outcomes of these discussions will be recorded and published on

ESOP's different media channels. Tools of recording vary from writing articles, making podcasts for Radio Universo or recording short video clips. The tool will be chosen according to the respective topic and how it can be best presented. Here short documentary on the 1st round of the Exchange Forum: а https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTiGfph2Mn4

# IV. And you....?

We hope that this little guidebook gave you some inspirations for your work and will help you in implementing (more) empowerment strategies in your daily activities.

We are very happy if you decide to put into practice a project such as ESOP in your city but as well the adaption of the single methods and strategies described, can bring a change.

We believe that only an approach, that gives migrants the instruments to be (again) the shapers of their live and that only an approach based on mutual learning and exchange, can promote social cohesion in the European societies. Let's do it together!

#### Contact:

More questions? Interested in an exchange on different empowerment and exchange strategies? Want to know more about ESOP?

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