On the 7th of March 2007 around seventy representatives of EQUAL projects, business support organisations, Danish authorities and governmental bodies as well as ethnic groups from all over Europe met in Copenhagen with the explicit aim of “breaking down the barriers” surrounding ethnic entrepreneurship. The conference was part of the activities organised by the transnational EQUAL project “Building Entrepreneurship”¹ which has partners in Denmark, Spain and Hungary.

Dina Kristina Kesic, Head of Knowledge Centre for Ethnic Entrepreneurship, EVU, the Danish lead partner of the project, launched the seminar by posing the challenge of how the valuable insights into ethnic minority entrepreneurship were going to be taken up at EU level now that the EQUAL programme is ending. She explained that they had taken to heart the messages made a year ago in Amsterdam in a previous EQUAL seminar on “Building the tools for opening up entrepreneurship for all”. In her view, entrepreneurship was one of the main routes for the integration of ethnic minorities into the labour market and broader society. In the current context, it was important for all the tools for breaking down the barriers to ethnic minority entrepreneurship be used as widely as possible.

The project manager at EVU Business Centre, Mr. Shahriar Shams II, then gave an overview of some of the tools and practices the project had developed in Denmark over the last two years. These include new methods for reaching out and offering business advice to ethnic entrepreneurs “on location” and employing business advisors from the same communities as the entrepreneurs.

Peter Stub Jorgensen, Director in DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities at the European Commission replied that the Commission was very conscious of the importance of both understanding and removing all the obstacles to entrepreneurship for disadvantaged groups - and particularly for ethnic minorities. He explained that the Commission would like EQUAL to create a new platform for the exchange of good practices in the field of opening up entrepreneurship to all members of society.

The starting point was to ensure that the lessons from EQUAL and other pilot projects on entrepreneurship were integrated into national and regional programmes funded under the next round of the Structural Funds. He said that EQUAL had shown that it was possible to break down the barriers to entrepreneurship in four key areas: strengthening the culture for entrepreneurship, integrating business support, opening the access to appropriate finance and improving sustainability of start-ups.

Mr Jorgensen explained that since the EQUAL Conference held in Amsterdam last year, several European Social Fund (ESF) Managing Authorities have formed a “Community of Practice” on “Inclusive Entrepreneurship”.

One of the first tasks of the Community of Practice is to develop a European screening instrument for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of entrepreneurship strategies from the point of view of people who face discrimination in the labour market. This will be linked to a bank of good practice so that any country, region or city that detects a particular gap in its policies can pull down a menu of possible solutions that have been tested in other places.

The Community of Practice will also examine how certain countries and regions have woven these strands of good practice into broader strategies for inclusive entrepreneurship which respond to some of the key labour market problems facing Europe today. The information will be used as a basis for making recommendations for the next round of the Structural Funds.

Mr Jorgensen explained that the German Presidency is preparing a Policy Forum to be held in Hannover on the 5-6th June 2007, on “Entrepreneurship to all” where different EQUAL lessons learned will be presented and where the instrument developed by the Community of Practice will be “validated”. After the Forum, the aim is to create a broader network of structural fund managers and people concerned with designing and implementing policies for inclusive entrepreneurship.

DEVELOPING THE BIGGER PICTURE

Shahamak Rezaei, assistant professor at the Roskilde University, brought the debate back to the specific problems facing ethnic entrepreneurs in the Danish Labour Market. According to his research, the income differential between immigrants and native Danes actually increases at higher levels of education as much of the formal education of ethnic minorities goes unrecognised and unused. In fact, although the Danish Government has made major efforts to increase the integration of ethnic minorities, a recent OECD report on The Labour Market Integration of Immigrants in Denmark shows that there is still a large gap between the labour market position of immigrants and native Danes.

Several investigations on ethnic minority entrepreneurship in Denmark have also pin-pointed some of the main challenges they face. These include access to bank loans and guarantees, the lack of a banking history, the knowledge of how to prepare a formal business plan and of local business culture, laws and regulations

In this context, Elisabeth Chaanhing, an ethnic Businesswoman, who studied to be a nurse in China, provided a graphic example of how she had managed to break through some of the barriers and gradually build up her restaurant business.
PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

During the afternoon the discussion took place in three parallel workshops.

The first workshop on **Entrepreneurship in deprived neighbourhoods** was lead by Dorthe Marie Degn from the EVU, with presentations from Ridha Shimi, Business Advisor of the Odense Erhvervsråd (Odense Trade and Business Council), one of the Danish EQUAL partners, and Sandra Lawrence, Senior Business Advisor of ACCBA, an association of community business advisors promoted by the EQUAL partners in the United Kingdom. ACCBA has developed an innovatory scheme for providing recognised training to community workers from ethnic minority organisations so that they can provide first stage business advice to the members of their community. This helps to overcome the distrust that exists with mainstream business support agencies and improves outreach and communication into deprived communities.

The participants argued that business support in deprived areas should form part of broader programmes for urban regeneration. A combination of outreach business advice together with microfinance can be especially effective. But individual support is often not enough to break the cycle of decline in many deprived urban areas. It has to be backed up by concerted action to open up the neighbourhoods and make them more attractive for external investors and entrepreneurs. One way of doing this is by locating flagship projects such as cultural centres, university departments, sports centres, and other public buildings in the area.

The second workshop on **Ethnic women entrepreneurs** was chaired by Tina Baghdadi, Nyvirk, Århus, with two presentations from Tina Wilchen Christensen, an anthropologist from the consultancy HUMANCULTURE and María Blanco from Barcelona Activa, the Spanish EQUAL lead partner. One of the key points made here was that many ethnic women entrepreneurs need support to create sustainable business networks. Various projects explained how they had successfully built networks among ethnic women entrepreneurs and later connected these with native business networks. These kinds of projects have to be long term to have an effect, since it takes a lot of time to make networks sustainable.

The workshop on **Growth potential for ethnic business owners** was animated by Torben Rasmussen from the Odense Erhvervsråd with a presentation from Jakob Stouman of his report on Successful Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Copenhagen. He provided some examples of how immigrants can break out of traditional low margin markets.

The working group came to three main conclusions. Firstly, there is a need to improve access to guarantees, microfinance and shared capital. Secondly, more attention should be paid to building an entrepreneurial spirit early on in the educational system. Thirdly, even the smallest entrepreneurs deserve good quality professional business advice. This should not be restricted exclusively to high growth sectors.

LINK to the Conference Program:
http://www.buildingentrepreneurship.com/default.aspx?PagId=5849&MenuId=5242