

Post-face

The final document: further considerations

During the final meeting held in Trento on 15th June 2010, the document was considered valid by all partners who declared that the contents included the project's main and commonly shared elements (through presentations, discussions during the meetings, the exchange of fact sheets and material, on the spot visits to companies, the interviews and informal exchanges, etc).

The final meeting also had the aim to:

- introduce one "best practice" per partner;
- express considerations about the work carried out;
- discuss the possible development of the project;
- further specify some of the contents of the document.

We believe it could be useful to briefly remember some of the considerations that the partners shared during the final meeting.

Special attention and importance was given to the "institutional provisions" that each experience proves to be necessary in order to practice flexible training and define it in terms of policy and not only as a one-off project: laws, administrative provisions, programmes, qualification systems and professional standards, training offer catalogues, advanced services for employment and guidance.

The importance of "contractual provisions" also seemed to gain importance in supporting training for workers at risk: framework agreements and protocols, agreements, negotiation practices between unions and enterprises, protection between unions and workers, etc.

At the cross road between these two dimensions, what gains importance is the availability of financial resources to support the policies, programmes, projects, agreements and contracts. The chance of referring to forms of "positive discrimination" was also taken into account in order to privilege the most fragile persons and achieve better results as regards the policies planned.

Furthermore, the "timing" and "continuity" of the project in time (for instance Norway) are very important elements in order to avoid that, from the risk of exclusion, people then fall into the actual tunnel of exclusion.

For this reason the "vision" seems to be crucial and must animate the institutional politics and entities that supply training, as well as the stakeholders and subjects of social mediation: from here, the idea that such "vision" should be discussed by the subjects of the community until it becomes a "common culture".

This vision should guide those who offer training in the understanding that the context must be "welcoming" for workers. By using language from psychoanalysis, we could define this context as a "holding" and also "good enough", a generator of self-confidence. Self-confidence has a positive relation with self-esteem and self-efficacy, both connected to empowerment.

It has however been proved, that the simple availability of the "conditions" to make "flexible training" possible are not enough to guarantee "effective learning". In other words, having created the conditions to access training, does not mean that the addressees of the training will actually have access to it. Further conditions are required to make people decide they want to use the chance they are being offered and even further conditions so that once they have obtained training, they actually gain learning.

It is possible to intervene in proactive terms but these conditions cannot be determined only from one side because they imply the final decision of the target subjects. This means that the relation between policy, programmes and projects on one side and results and outputs on the other, is still a multi-causal and probabilistic relation and not a mono-causal and deterministic one.

Besides paying attention to the "hard" aspects of the policy proposal (the laws, the plans and programmes, the financial resources, the contractual agreements and protocols, the provisions, the qualification systems and the catalogues of the training offer, the employment guidance and support services, the professional qualification of those who offer guidance, etc) in order to achieve the results desired, it is also necessary to pay attention to the "soft" aspects (how target subjects see the service and their needs, friendly relations between peers and operators, trust between them, the social capital, a feeling of belonging to a community and social inclusion, mutual support and the chance to recognize oneself in the results, social recognition and the environment in which it takes place): simply focussing on the first aspects forgetting about the second ones, decreases the chances of success, meaning the chance that besides "flexible training" we also have "effective learning".

The conditions that must be mixed together in order to achieve a positive result, explain a further aspect that came up during the final meeting: the leadership of the process, necessary so that the policy results in a possible programme. With such complex organizations, it is important that they

can rely on a "process owner" (there can be a different one for each experience) who has the leadership and who represents both the past and future aim of the course.

An observation that came up by analyzing the prototypes of the interventions resulting from the "best practices" of the partners, regards the importance of individual assistance, (in some cases it becomes a real "advocacy") that must be carried out during the process that brings from the analysis and recognition of the individual need to the decision of the training strategy to face it, to its actual implementation. On the other hand, it seemed important to discuss the different characteristics of those who can carry out this assistance function: in some cases the Union (UK, Switzerland), in other cases the public employment services (Norway), in other cases again, the Public programming body (Trento) or Tecnostruttura with public funds (Austria); in other cases it can be all of these entities (Switzerland). Basically, what seems to be crucial is the saturation of the function that can be carried out differently in different countries according to the culture, history, institutional organization, inter-institutional and industrial relations.

The final discussion also gave the chance to concentrate on a very important matter because it is what the whole "meaning" of the work carried out by the partnership and final document depends on.

Given that this project considers "flexible training" a positive resource for workers at risk of exclusion, is it possible to say that this fact can be proved by experience?

It is not enough to say that this is something that was beyond the scope of this project for which flexible training is automatically considered something positive. We cannot not give an answer to this question. The answer seems to be however already included in the content of the project.

Basically, on one hand, the specialized-technical literature confirms such assumption; on the other hand, the best practices taken into consideration are examples that confirm the assumption: in each best practice there is a different mix of the conditions that favour flexibility (hard and soft).

If one agrees with this "contingency" vision of flexibility, one question regarding the identification of "meta-conditions" seems to arise, that can be valid crosswise to the different "contingent/local/contextual" models.

This could be one of the main issues to focus on for the development of the work of this partnership that carried out a particularly positive job. The evaluation questionnaires filled in by the single partners proved how this work was unanimously appreciated, going beyond the initial expectations, thanks to the commitment of all partners and to the work carried out by the coordinators.