



Identification, Dissemination and Exchange of good practice in  
Local Employment development and promoting better governance

## Betet Skara project, Antwerp – Belgium

**Introduction** Betet Skara is a weaving house in Antwerp, Belgium. Betet Skara means ‘weaving house’ in Aramese language and consists of a working place (“atelier”) in the centre of Antwerp. The project involves a team of 4 weavers, a textile designer, a general coordinator and many volunteers. The project develops, designs and produces fine hand made fabrics, using the “Assyrian” method: a technique which the weavers brought from their home country South east Turkey. Betet Skara is a weaving house in Antwerp, Belgium.

The project was originally created in 1998 as a European social integration program for refugees. Assyrian Christians in Southeast Turkey practised the old craft of pit weaving. It was their profession, their occupation and their source of income. Due to the turbulent political climate many of the Assyrian Christians fled to the West. In Belgium they settled in the suburbs of Antwerp, Brussels and Mechelen. It was difficult for them to find work and integrate in society. Together with the grassroots organisation PSC, the coordinator Aldegonde Van Alsenoy realized that weaving was the main ‘professional qualification’ possessed by the group. The interested parties sat down together and the idea of founding a weaving workshop was launched.

**Nature of the approach** Betet Skara started as an employment program. Betet Skara is now a full socio-economic enterprise offering its services to fashion and interior design companies in Europe. Location, combination and translation are important elements in the process.

The project has been funded variously through European, national, local and regional level funding, including ‘Preparatory measures to integrate refugees into European society’, bridging subsidies from the city of Antwerp, and structural funding from the Flemish Government, which recognises the project as a social workplace. The project also receives some private sponsorship.

**Geographical focus** The project has focused on a neighbourhood in Northern Antwerp (“2060”): a few statistics for the local area include:

- 1/8 of all Belgium unemployed workers
- 15% of all male unemployed workers
- 95% of all non- European unemployed workers of the district Antwerp
- 1/3 of all Maghreb & Turkish Migrants in Flanders
- 8000 receive social benefits

## **Partnership**

The project arose from an exchange of know how with managers from the private sector, press agents, website designers, organisers of interior design exhibitions and fashion consultants. The network currently involved in the project includes:

- Assyrian community
- Office of Tourism
- Culture Antwerp,
- Department of the Mayor of Antwerp,
- Local, Flemish and Federal Department of Labour, Economy , integration and culture
- Fashion museum
- Design academy of Endhoven

## **Successes**

- The positive use of skills, location, combination, translation, right timing resulted in a very strong project offering employment, good work spirit, integration, awareness raising and a strong NGO & network - Betet Skara is now a full socio-economic enterprise offering its services to fashion and interior design companies in Europe.
- Through mixing and matching funding, the project has managed to be sustainable over a number of years.

## **Lessons learnt**

Problems experienced include:

- Misunderstandings based on different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. craftsmen/industrial, upperclass/ lowerclass)
- A slow start due to the economic environment
- Cashflow problems due to operating as an independent NGO:  
Financial insecurity for the future

Lessons:

- It is important to work closely with immigrant groups who are experiencing persistent unemployment to identify 'hidden skills' which may be relevant to the local labour market.
- Cities offer high value added market niches which can be exploited by social enterprises and SMEs, particularly in relation to traditional arts and crafts, food, leisure opportunities and retail goods.

## **Tools and transferability**

Transferable elements of the BETET SKARA include:

The importance of skills, location, combining different elements, good timing, building trust, starting with an organisation which has a long-term relation with the target group, always incorporating respect, involving the target group as much as possible, looking for passionate co-workers, board members and volunteers, believing in what you are doing, being proud and having guts!