

Finding ways to promote upward mobility

An Interview with Co-Organizer Jan Rath

A major topic in this year's conference was "global justice". How does this relate to the labour market issues discussed at the symposium of the Network IQ?

Personally, I am inclined to say that labour market participation is way more important than the more softer goals such as allowing immigrant ethnic minorities to maintain their cultural identity. Labour provides financial resources which, in turn, allows newcomers to live a better life, to move to another neighbourhood and so forth. Being active on the labour market offers them plenty opportunity to interact with others and to strengthen one's networks. Working also boosts the sense of self and one's status.

Allowing (forced) immigrants to work is far off from being accepted in many European countries.

Denying individuals the right to labour is highly problematic. I am sensitive to the fact that many migrants, unskilled migrants in particular, do not always find well-paid jobs. Some are stuck in so-called 3-D jobs: dangerous, dirty, dull. While a lousy job is always much better than no job, finding ways to promote their upward mobility remains obviously important.

What are the gains for the immigrants, but also for society as a whole, if immigrants gain access to labour markets?

Labour market participation is not just a moral issue (as the term 'justice' seems to suggest), it is also of material importance for both the migrants, the business community and the receiving society at large. Talking about the business community, I never understood the narrow focus on the government when it comes to dealing with migrants' labour market position. Small and big businesses as well as their associations should play a much more active role that was the case thus far, a role that – of course- should go beyond paying lip services.

IQ: As the co-organizer of this year's edition, how do you evaluate the Metropolis conference as a whole?

Jan Rath: I look back at the conference with a lot of satisfaction. The conference was successful in terms of both logistics and contents. Keep in mind that there was only little time to get this event off the ground.

The initial plan was to have the conference in Istanbul, right?

JR: Our partners in Turkey worked very hard to accomplish this, but the involvement of the government was delicate, especially since we wish to remain independent. And after the 15 July coup attempt, it was clear that Turkey could not offer a place for the free exchange of knowledge. We were fortunate that The Hague stepped in. Eventually, over 500 delegates signed up. There was a good vibe and I only heard positive comments.

This year's conference somehow had a different 'touch' in comparison to previous conferences.

JR: We, that is the International Steering Committee of the Metropolis project, were not entirely satisfied with the way the conferences developed. Plenary sessions became somewhat predictable and did not allow a lot of time for discussion. So, we decided to focus on new topics and we also approached older topics from a different angle, we invited not only the usual suspects, but also more provoking speakers, we gave speakers no more than 6-8 minutes to make their point, we selected the chairs more carefully and instructed them to better mind the time, etc. It seems that this did help to speed up the presentations and to encourage discussion.

This interview was conducted by Johnny Van Hove