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European Migrant Entrepreneurship Network

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“Training Migrant Entrepreneurs: Same Trick or Different Trade?”

The Association of Teacher Education in Europe organized its Winter Conference this year around three topics, one of which was 'Refugee Education'. As the focus was around 'teach the teachers', a presentation on the developments around training programs for immigrant entrepreneurs was considered fitting. The focus of the presentation was first on the story of Rami, a Syrian refugee in the Netherlands. His narrative was then linked to different characteristics associated with entrepreneur training and empowerment programs in the Netherlands.

Rami came to the Netherlands in 2014, with his wife and his young son. They were placed in the east of the country, and he wanted to pick up his old profession immediately. He holds a degree as civil engineer but soon discovered that his diploma, even though it was officially validated, was not of any value for Dutch employers. He would have to go back to University and follow the program for four years. He decided that he did not want to spend another four years studying a similar topic.

He looked for alternatives and, with the help of cousins in Syria and Saudi Arabia, he decided to set up a restaurant. He had no experience in that business but his one cousin was a chef in Damascus and knew all about the preparation of food and about the qualities future employees needed to possess. His cousin in Saudi Arabia was willing to help with the funding.

He had to ask his cousin for money because his request for support was denied in the Dutch system. He did not have any restaurant experience, he did not have a good credit history, and he did not have any evidence that his restaurant was going to succeed. The Dutch system would rather have him study and rely on government support for a number of years, than help him with financial self-sufficiency.

The example (or case study) of Rami was used to illustrate the importance of flexible training/empowerment programs where a business plan is not just judged by financial calculations,



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the personal characteristics of the entrepreneur, and the reach of potential customers, but also within the context of a community, the larger reach of a successful business, and the support systems of the entrepreneur. Rami's story illustrates that we cannot train and finance everybody in the same way but we need to look at each case. Rami did not have the entrepreneurial history most financial institutions would want but he did have a network around him that had that history. He is now opening a second restaurant, he employs eight other Syrian refugees and his business is booming. He has successfully reached out to local business organizations and he has expanded his network and social capital to reach far beyond the Syrian community.

It is too early to reach a conclusion, but based on the case of Rami, one can say that training and empowerment programs that support starting businesses should have a broad approach to analyze a large array of relevant aspects.