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Paper Dreams. Employment schemes as a regularisation opportunity

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The fight against unemployment and job insecurity in the city's most troubled neighbourhoods is one of Barcelona City Council's top priorities. One of the actions with the highest priority is the reception and inclusion of people in an irregular situation and the creation of employment opportunities for them. This is why Barcelona Activa has launched a specific programme under the Municipal Employment Schemes that provides people with the opportunity to find a job, which in turns enables them to apply for a work and residence permit. Since 2016, a total of 152 people have successfully processed their work and residence permits thanks to this occupational programme with a concrete 12-month employment contract. This provides access to quality employment, which in turn contributes to these immigrants' social integration. Participation in the employment scheme also improves the employability of participants, who gain work experience and improve their professional skills, facilitating their future entry into the general job market. It is an opportunity that goes beyond the working environment and brings the most vulnerable people closer to becoming citizens with rights and a democratic ability to participate. As expressed by one of the participants, the Municipal Employment Schemes programme is "much more than just a job".

1. Introduction. Regularisation and employment actions.

The fight against unemployment and job insecurity is one of Barcelona City Council's top priorities. This is why it wants to promote quality employment for everyone. In order to do this, it has designed and implemented new projects in the neighbourhoods and for those people that face the most difficulties in the city. The aim is to help participants by identifying needs, providing training and guidance and creating job opportunities to provide a comprehensive response to the needs identified in each person. One of the most necessary actions identified is the improvement of the reception and inclusion of people in an irregular situation in the city of Barcelona. Barcelona City Council is working on increasing these people's employment through the active employment policies deployed by Barcelona Activa.

Before the pandemic, Barcelona's unemployment figures had been gradually falling, but this decrease was not the same in every neighbourhood and nor did it affect everyone equally. While some groups were coming out of unemployment, others were seriously struggling to find work.

a. Barcelona Activa Integrated Employment Contracts Specialist Team.

b. Barcelona Activa Pròxim Programme Specialist Team.

c. Dual vocational training students specialising in Social Integration participating in the Integrated Employment Contracts programme.

And, in this situation, it was people in an irregular situation who encountered the most obstacles. This is why Barcelona City Council has set aside a few positions in programmes involving employment for people in an irregular situation, so they can start their regularisation process. The City Council is committed to the implementation of a variety of programmes that can lead to regularisation opportunities. These are the “Municipal Employment Schemes”, a number of employment actions linked to the “Neighbourhood Plan” and the call for applications for the “Impulsem el que fas” [We Boost What You Do] grant.

The first experience of helping people in an irregular situation through the Municipal Employment Schemes programme took place in 2016. At the time, unauthorised street peddling was a social problem in the city, and the City Council, under the Taula de Ciutat [City Table] agreement against illegal peddling, committed to the creation of jobs through the Municipal Employment Schemes programme to provide an alternative life for the people living outside the rules. Under this employment scheme, these people in an irregular situation are promised a 12-month employment contract, which makes the administrative regularisation process to obtain work and residence permits available to them. These actions were based on a medium-term strategy to reduce the conflict and social tension climate and improve social inclusion for this group linked to illegal peddling by offering employment alternatives so they could stop peddling.

This initial experience led to the start of 43 regularisation procedures. After a processing period that varied between 5 and 18 months, 41 of these had a positive outcome, with the people concerned gaining a 12-month employment contract. Subsequent rounds of the Municipal Employment Schemes have retained their aim of including people in an irregular administrative situation to achieve the goal of obtaining a work and residence permit by participating in the programme.

Since 2016, a total of 205 applications from people in an irregular situation have been processed in connection with the Municipal Employment Schemes’ occupational initiative after assessing the candidates’ employability. In other words, out of all these people’s conditions for adjusting to a job, 175 regularisation procedures were finally carried out. Of these, 152 had a positive outcome, with the people concerned obtaining work and residence permits and finally signing an employment contract under this scheme. During this time, other types of people in an irregular situation have also been included following referrals from various municipal services and programmes that cater for these groups, diversifying the types of people in an irregular situation who are offered the chance to participate in the Municipal Employment Schemes as much as possible.

2. Development and assessment of the Municipal Employment Schemes programme as a resource in regularisation processes

The 152 people who have signed an employment contract as a result of participating in the Municipal Employment Schemes programme with the aim of achieving regularisation have been referred from various programmes and services that help people in an irregular administrative situation:

- Irregular Settlements Plan Office (OPAI): This observes settlements in order to design intervention projects. It carries out community work in the environment to facilitate community life and social cohesion.
- Assistance Service for Immigrants, Emigrants and Refugees (SAIER): This service reports and advises on immigration, shelter, emigration and voluntary return for any citizen living in Barcelona.
- Neighbourhood Plan: This is a programme for reversing inequalities between the city’s neighbourhoods.
- Socio-Economic Initiatives (ISE) aimed at achieving social transformation.

- B-MINCOME project: This is a pilot project against poverty and inequality in Barcelona's deprived areas.
- Càritas: This organisation provides comprehensive care for people and groups, particularly the poorest and most excluded.
- Agency for a Comprehensive Approach to Sex Work (ABITS): This agency assists Cis and trans women engaged in prostitution in the city of Barcelona, particularly the most vulnerable ones.
- Dispositiu Pròxim: This is a vocational integration programme for immigrants who meet the requirements for regularisation.
- Làbora-Itinerari G5 programme: The aim of this programme is to improve employment in people in an irregular situation through care, support and regularisation.

In order to carry out this part of the Municipal Employment Schemes programme for people in an irregular administrative situation, an internal coordination process with the municipal services and programmes that cater for this group has been launched so as to efficiently manage the referral of the applications received. Barcelona Activa's specialist teams assess the employability of candidates referred by the various services, identifying those with the greatest potential to successfully regulate their situation and better adjust to the jobs in the programme, by following the following steps:

- Referral of applications: The municipal services that look after people in an irregular administrative situation identify those in the best position and put them forward as candidates by drawing up a technical referral report covering a variety of employment aspects.
- Selection interviews: Barcelona Activa's specialist team conducts employment interviews with all the proposed candidates in order to get to know each person and their socio-economic context and situation, professional and language skills, aptitudes and relevant physical factors. This interview enables them to assess the person's employability and helps establish whether they are currently "employable" and, therefore, if their administrative regularisation process has a positive outcome, whether they will be able to perform the tasks involved in the job assigned to them or if, on the contrary, they are currently "unemployable" for the reasons identified (the most common being health reasons and a lack of minimum language skills to communicate).
- Preliminary contract proposal: This involves identifying the employment profile and category of each "employable" person using the information obtained in the interview in order to process the preliminary contract, and subsequently formalising the employment commitment between Barcelona Activa and the person if there is a positive outcome with the regularisation procedure.
- Identification of the work experience project: Once each person's professional profile and skills have been ascertained, Barcelona Activa's specialist team contacts the municipal collaborators to identify the most suitable projects for the profiles identified.
- Drawing up of the timetable for the regularisation procedure: This timetable has to be open and flexible because the pre-established time for these procedures can vary.

People who can regularise their administrative situation through social integration must comply (and prove such compliance) with a number of absolutely essential requirements: having lived in Spain continuously for the last three years; not having a criminal or police record (either in their country of origin or in Spain); having a valid passport; having a full-time job offer with a minimum length of one year under which they are paid the minimum wage; and being familiar with Catalan

culture and the official languages (Catalan and Spanish). This is an initial filter to be applied to candidates put forward by the Municipal Employment Schemes, as it establishes the likelihood of the regularisation process being successful.

The municipal services that assist people in an irregular situation provide them with legal support in the management of all these documents and the processing of the administrative procedure. Once all the necessary documentation has been put together, with a valid passport, the appropriate application form and payment of the fee, it is all submitted to the Immigration Office. The regional government office should then issue a positive or negative decision within a maximum of three months.

Based on our experience with such regularisation processes, we have identified some of the main difficulties faced by the people concerned, which often hinder the processing of their regularisation procedures:

- Difficulties obtaining criminal record certificates from the country of origin. These documents from other countries are subject to certain requirements in order to be considered valid: where applicable, they must be translated into Spanish or the other official language of the territory in which the application is being submitted. In order for the document to be valid for official purposes, the translation must be carried out by a sworn translator. In addition, it must be duly authenticated. The cost of this procedure varies greatly depending on the country of origin: from €6 for a certificate issued in Colombia to €500 for one issued in Cameroon. These tasks have recently been affected by the international state of alert (with the closure of embassies, consulates and diplomatic missions), which has further delayed the regularisation process.
- Payment of fees. The payment of processing fees has posed a major challenge for the programme: participants often lack the financial resources for this expense, which has led to the need to coordinate with their social contacts so they could help with this disbursement.
- Processing time. The social integration-based regularisation procedure suffers from another problem: the time required to obtain the work and residence permit, which takes at least two months and often much longer due to the public administrations' workload. This is a determining factor in the regularisation process, as the companies concerned in these procedures need an accurate forecast of how long the process is likely to take.

Once this procedure has been carried out, and after the necessary time for the relevant administrative procedures to be carried out has passed, the big moment arrives: if the outcome is positive, the person concerned obtains an identity number for foreign nationals (NIE) and the company has one month from the date of the decision to register them with the social security system and inform the Immigration Office. It is from this moment that the person concerned can request an appointment to obtain an identity card for foreign nationals (TIE). Once we have received confirmation of the positive outcome for each candidate, the Municipal Employment Schemes programme specialist team identifies the employment project in which the person concerned will have the best opportunity to develop their professional potential. The day of signing of the contract is very emotional, as the person being employed has achieved the aim of securing a job with an employment contract that will open up many possibilities helping confer dignity on their life.

As mentioned at the start of the article, a total of 152 people have been hired since 2016 in connection with regularisation projects under the Municipal Employment Schemes. The 152 people who have obtained a work and residence permit and secured employment have the following characteristics:

- 65% are men.
- 45% are between 30 and 39 years old.
- 31% completed primary school.

- Over 50% are from African countries.

The following table contains a summary of the data characterising the 152 people who have successfully regularised their administrative situation as a result of the Municipal Employment Schemes' regularisation project.

Table 1. People who have successfully regularised their administrative situation as a result of the Municipal Employment Schemes. 2016

	Participants	%
Gender		
Men	99	65
Women	53	35
Age		
Under 30 years old	31	20
30 to 39 years old	68	45
40 to 55 years old	50	33
> 55 years old	3	2
Level of education		
No education	22	14
Primary education	47	31
Compulsory secondary education	45	3
Post-compulsory secondary education	25	16
University	13	9
People with functional diversity		
With functional diversity	1	1
Without functional diversity	151	99
Nationality		
Spain	0	0
Other EU countries	1	1
Outside the EU	151	99

What Barcelona Activa offers are contracts linked to various employment projects that in this case facilitate the administrative regularisation procedures. This is quality employment with a 12-month full-time employment contract for a specific task or service, whose professional category corresponds to the specific contracting table for active employment policies. As of 2021, this salary table provides for a gross salary of between €1,230 and €1,530 depending on the employment category. The table sets out three different employment categories based on the project assigned and the work plan envisaged:

- Assistant category: This group includes jobs requiring basic, but not specialist, knowledge of the project and the tasks to be carried out. The employee receives direct and specific instructions on the tasks to be carried out and has limited initiative and autonomy. Basic skills in the use of tools and machinery are required. Examples include: cleaning assistant, maintenance assistant, forestry assistant or digital documentary assistant.

Table 2. Distribution in relation to the country of origin people who have successfully regularised their administrative situation as a result of the Municipal Employment Schemes. 2016

Country of origin	Participants	%
Senegal	61	40
Morocco	15	10
Nigeria	13	9
Honduras	9	6
Ghana	7	5
Mali	5	3
Gambia	4	3
Cameroon	3	2
Russia	3	2
Ukraine	3	2
Venezuela	3	2
Bolivia	2	1
Brazil	2	1
Colombia	2	1
Ivory Coast	2	1
Ecuador	2	1
Equatorial Guinea	2	1
Pakistan	2	1
El Salvador	2	1
Albania	1	1
Dominican Republic	1	1
Georgia	1	1
Guinea	1	1
Mauritania	1	1
Mexico	1	1
Nepal	1	1
Romania	1	1
Serbia and Montenegro	1	1
Chile	1	1
Total	152	100

Source: Own data.

- **Officer category:** This group includes jobs requiring specific skills or professional experience. The employee must have a certain degree of initiative and autonomy. They are also required to be skilled in the use of tools, equipment or machinery based on the project assigned. The tasks assigned may require the employee to be responsible for the work of others. Examples include: maintenance officer, environmental agent officer or forestry officer.
- **Assistant specialist:** This group includes jobs requiring responsibility, a certain degree of autonomy and specialist technical knowledge. The employee receives orders and guidance from a hierarchical superior to perform the tasks. The employee may also have management and supervision responsibilities for staff under their responsibility. Examples include: community service specialist, installation specialist, environmental agent specialist, environmental outreach specialist, tourism and commercial revitalisation specialist, computer application design specialist, IT specialist and digital outreach specialist, and community service agent specialist, etc.

The Municipal Employment Schemes programme aims to improve the employability of the people who take part in it, alternating work experience with skill enhancement activities such as training. In

the case of the regularisation project of this programme, this occupational enhancement takes on a special relevance given that with this recruitment the people affected, in a difficult journey that aims to maintain this regularisation situation in force. For this reason, a number of skill enhancement activities are carried out during the employment contract in the form of training in various areas such as occupational risk prevention, vocational training linked to the employment plan to be deployed in the programme, training in key skills and, finally, training to improve job search tools and strategies.

Throughout the Municipal Employment Schemes programme linked to regularisation processes, the programme's specialist team seriously reinforced the support provided to participants in relation to adjusting to different jobs and work dynamics, with particular focus on knowing their labour rights and duties. They did this after it was identified during follow-up that some people, for example, were going to work when they were ill or had a temperature because they were worried about the consequences of sick leave for their employment, such as dismissal or a reduction in salary. In such cases, the programme's specialist team worked to raise awareness and knowledge of employees' labour rights and duties, as they often did not want to avail themselves of some of their basic labour rights, such as maternity leave, sick leave or the right to annual leave, because most of them did not see annual leave as a mandatory remunerated rest period and were in some cases reluctant to plan holiday periods linked to their employment. Once the meaning of holidays had been internalised as a basic vested labour right, participants told us about their holiday plans, which mostly involved visiting their families in their countries of origin. Most of them had not been back to their own countries since they had first left, as they would have been unable to enter Spain again, and in many cases had not been back for over six years.

People who had participated in the regularisation programme had experienced few labour-related issues and were strongly committed to the programme and their workplace. The assessments made by the people in charge of the municipal projects regarding the attitude, effort and quality of work of the people recruited have been very positive. Participant satisfaction data is available for all the programmes in the Municipal Employment Schemes.

The regularisation projects are extremely highly rated. The aspects most highly rated by the people concerned are: the possibility of regularising their administrative situation; the support provided in the employment scheme; the learning acquired through training; the improvement in the work experience and learning of new trades; a feeling of dignity in relation to the employment contract; and social and labour integration as a result of the programme.

3. Impact: employment programmes as an opportunity for a decent life

In addition to the first impact of taking part in the Municipal Employment Schemes programme for people who successfully regularise their administrative situation through the programme, obtaining a job ensures access to income, which in turn gives them access, for example, to decent housing, health benefits, the ability to bring their families to Barcelona and be reunited with them or the ability to send money to their countries of origin. The medium-term aim of the programme is to enable these people to maintain their regularised situation. In order to achieve this, it is essential that they can secure employment after taking part in the occupation initiative.

With the aim of ascertaining the situation of the people who had taken part in the Municipal Employment Schemes' regularisation programme, we undertook some field work involving contacting these people by telephone to find out their situation after the end of the programme. The aim was to contact the 152 people linked to the regularisation programme since 2016; 107 of these were successfully contacted.

The overall rating of these 107 people regarding their participation in the programme was very positive, as the occupation initiative has opened up new opportunities for them and improved their relationship with the public administration. The financial resources achieved have enabled them to meet their basic needs, and they are pleased with the recognition and positive reinforcement

provided by the programme and work experience from the outset. Having a work and residence permit also gives them greater freedom of movement, including the ability to travel to their countries of origin and visit their families.

Most of the people contacted (over 70%) are working or have found a job after the end of the Municipal Employment Schemes programme. At present, 27 of those contacted are participating in the current occupation programme. They feel optimistic, stating that they are experiencing a significant change in their lives that they believe will have a very positive impact in the future.

Another significant aspect is the impact of the pandemic on their employment prospects, as 11 people have told us that they lost their jobs due to the impact of Covid-19. The pandemic has also affected people who were looking for work, as the digitalisation of services and the remote assistance provided by most organisations have made it difficult for them to use the job search channels available.

Some of the people contacted, however, reported a complex situation after the end of the employment programme. They suddenly found it difficult to find work in the general market, or could only find contracts that were less than a year long, had unstable working conditions, or both. This results in a stressful situation because, in order to renew the initial work permit, they must provide evidence of subsequent employment and social security contribution periods, and they often feel forced to take whatever job they can find. In general, based on the data and comments shared by the participants contacted, we have identified some of the barriers encountered at the end of the programme:

- difficulties using standard job search channels
- difficulties accessing procedures with the Immigration Office and the public administration
- delays and complexity in the procedure for accessing social benefits or other bureaucratic processes.

In many cases, this is compounded by illiteracy, insufficient language skills, limited IT proficiency and high financial hardship. In view of the difficulties and procedural changes in the job market due to the pandemic, we have observed that the people contacted are encountering many difficulties in finding a job that will enable them to renew their work and residence permit as necessary. In fact, a large majority of them stated that they do not know how to find work on the Internet and are open to advice regarding how to find work and the use of new technologies, as they are aware of their need and importance.

Virtually every person we were able to contact has a valid work and residence permit, and only one of them has been unable to successfully renew it due to an insufficient number of days of social security contributions, leading their status to change to one of sudden irregularity. It is worth noting that half the people contacted have encountered some problems renewing their documents, as they are no longer receiving legal support from the services and/or programmes that were previously supporting them, and one of the reasons for these problems is not knowing how to make an appointment for the necessary procedures. Their legal situation is the first obstacle to be resolved, but the complex immigration laws and regulations result in very lengthy bureaucratic procedures and in some migrants living in an irregular situation for years. Although the vast majority of the people interviewed have not been in a situation of administrative irregularity, this is a constant threat that affects every work decision they make.

People who are not working manage to meet their basic needs through public benefits or occasional help from friends or family. In spite of this, almost half the people contacted reported not having a stable home. Most of them live in rented accommodation or share a flat, but very few of them are the named person on the lease. Half the people contacted encounter problems when it

comes to signing a lease. One third of the people interviewed asserted that their housing conditions have room for improvement, and the rest were satisfied with their housing situation.

In conclusion, the deployment of the Municipal Employment Schemes programme linked to regularisation processes has had very positive ratings. In the short term, taking part in the programme has enabled participants to regularise their administrative situation, which is a very valuable result in itself. In addition to the regularisation process, taking part in the programme has given participants the possibility of true integration, sharing work experience with different people, increasing their personal autonomy, and acquiring and adjusting to working habits on the one hand; and access to stable income that has helped them cover basic needs such as food, healthcare and housing on the other. Furthermore, the ratings of both participants and the municipal collaborators involved in handling the employment actions have clearly shown a very positive result in which the goals set were achieved.

Despite the complexity of the process and the long way there is still to go to provide more support in these kinds of situations, the programme's medium-term impact on participants is undeniable, as it creates opportunities beyond the strict working environment, because the ability to obtain a work and residence permit also provides access to citizenship, with rights and democratic participation. For most of the people interviewed, work is the main focus of integration. It is an essential part of their lives and the employment situation therefore affects the feeling of integration. We also assess very positively the fact that almost all the participants in the regularisation programme have been able to renew their work and residence permit after taking part in the programme, which further consolidates the initial opportunities it provides.

As expressed by one of the participants, the Municipal Employment Schemes programme is “much more than just a job”.

Useful resources

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