



Latent Potential :

Tapping Human and Social Capital to promote and support Gender Equality in decision-making



Haydn Rees



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Current Work	European Officer for Northamptonshire County Council located in the Economic Development Team.
Area	Northamptonshire, UK
Education and Professional Training	BA Hons Politics/Economic History ; experience of developing international projects, experience of the European Commission environment from his secondment to the East Midlands European Office
Professional areas of interest	Interested in employment projects, the cultural economy and the impacts of EU enlargement.
Areas of Expertise	Employment strategy; European affairs

PROJECT PROFILE

Participant	Haydn Rees
Area	Northamptonshire, UK
Project	The Northamptonshire Integrated Local Employment Strategy
Theme	Employment strategy (in this article: esp. about women)

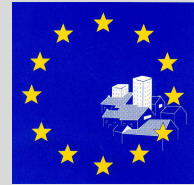
Socio-economic context

The County of Northamptonshire covers a wide area with large rural areas mixed with urban areas. The population is about 625,000, and two thirds live in the major towns of Northampton, Wellingborough, Kettering, Corby, Daventry, Rushden, Towcester and Brackley, and the other one third live in more rural village settings. Northamptonshire is



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strategically located at the 'crossroads of England' easily accessible between major cities of Birmingham and London and Oxford and Cambridge.

Northamptonshire's proximity to the South East is one of the main drivers for economic change. We have one of the fastest growth rates and one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. Recent government initiatives have earmarked our county as a growth area for potential government support, and the county council is engaged in leveraging in resources through regional partnerships and developments. This growth means that we are at key stage of regeneration decision making. However, these factors mask the economic and social weaknesses which create barriers for realising some of the potentials described above and impacts most on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups:

- low overall levels of skills and productivity
- decline of traditional labour intensive industries such as boot and shoe manufacturing
- need to raise educational and social standards of young people
- recent problems in agricultural and rural communities
- emerging communities, particularly growth in migrant communities

Project description and objectives

The Northamptonshire Integrated Local Employment Strategy ([NILES](#))¹ was launched in December 2004, funded by the European Union's Article 6 Innovative Measures fund. European Social Fund (ESF) Article 6 funds have been earmarked to support the delivery of local employment action plans under the European Employment Strategy. The Article 6 regulation encourages projects to pave the way for experimentation with innovative ideas and pilot projects, which could subsequently be incorporated into projects. This will therefore be an important key component of the NILES strategy development process.

In articulating a local commitment to employment, the following preparatory measures are considered important:

- To pilot the development of local action plans for employment promoted by local authorities
- To improve capacity building, monitoring, evaluation and benchmarking.
- To promote trans-national cooperation and the dissemination of good practice.

The EU requires the Local Employment Strategy to cover not only **employment**, but also **gender equality, social inclusion**, economic development, innovation and the information society.

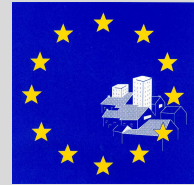
- Taking the European Employment Strategy as its guidance, NILES identified actions relating to:
- labour supply and economic activity
- human capital and skills including for women

¹To view the project report: <http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/6425991A-C08A-4C6D-B0A8-532795ED1089/0/NILESREPORT.pdf> or <http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/Democracy/European/NILES.htm>



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- o enterprise and job creation

Northamptonshire is an area undergoing changes. Its population is on the rise and the area is expected to become highly urbanised.

In terms of female participation in the labour market, it emerged from research that we were above UK targets.

Economic activity rate females of working age 2002	
Area	%
Great Britain	72.6
East Midlands	73.7
Leicestershire	79.9
Northamptonshire	77.7
Milton Keynes	76.5
Bedfordshire	78.8
Cambridgeshire	77.5
Warwickshire	77.8

However, analysing results we discovered that women, were under-employed: either they worked only part time or worked only in low-skill jobs. ²

We consulted other districts, learning centres, the chamber of commerce. Our idea was to tackle the issue of women' skills and do research in order to make strategic recommendations.

A study that was done earlier showed that women were happy about this situation. A lot of low-skill single women, women on income support, used employment agencies to do low-skill temporary work. This employment pattern did not promote improving their skills. In areas of deprivation, this pattern does not only apply to women, it also applies to men. These are minority communities who think that skills are not needed because the employment rate is low in the region, anyway.

Our in-depth study showed that:

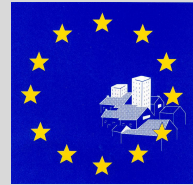
- o Women were not informed about the ways in which they could acquire skills;
- o They also lacked role model of women entrepreneurship;

² The complete report "Women in the Northamptonshire Labour Market" can be consulted via the following link:
http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/51C86BAE-0366-4F95-ACD9-5932038AEC98/0/FinalReportWomen_2.pdf



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- We also wanted to put forward the fact that women possess time management skills gained through child raising, house management. We decided that these skills should be tapped in.

- **Lack of information about training courses available**
- **Lack of skills and poor awareness about own skills**
- **Need to develop role models**
- **Lack of women in senior management positions**

The objectives of our employment strategy were to tackle these issues and:

- Increase female representation at higher levels of decision making
- Increase the number of women in employment
- Increase the quality of female employment by training (improve information, about training courses, improve access to training by improving mobility esp. in rural areas), encouraging them to set up businesses, improving child care facilities to allow women to invest in a career.
- The issue of improving female average earnings was directly slinked to that of better skills, better salaries, and greater time availabilities.

Actions to reach these objectives were identified:

- We needed to do an audit of available training. If courses were available, then question was just about information. But if courses were not available or if courses were given at the wrong time of day, then it would be a question or reorientation and restructuring training services.
- Developing entrepreneurship can be done through network projects, peer support, mentoring..
- Increasing very basing skills such as filling an application, passing job interviews, increase confidence (especially that of women who had been out of the workforce for some time), making women aware of their skill, empower them through self confidence building.

Results, evaluation and obstacles

We still need to implement an evaluation strategy. Evaluation, I think, in our project is about getting support from our peers and partners in the project's steering group meeting (ie. chamber of commerce, university, employment agencies, learning council etc.). We did not publish our strategy before the steering group approved it.

For me, the best evaluation in this kind of project is peer evaluation.

Concerning obstacles met: we had to persevere in communicating with the European Commission when we wanted to make changes to our project in order them.



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Lessons learned

Firstly, I want to say that I am happy to share my experience on how to work with the European Commission.

I learn that you need to consult widely, to ensure that you are not duplicating work, and to make sure that all the sides work together. Working together assures that your recommendations are better accepted and supported.

>> Importance of networking and consulting

It is easy to look at targets and tick boxes. But equality is a process, not just a target. You need to reassess what is the new challenge each time you reach a target.

>> Equality is a process. It is not just about reaching a target

The biggest obstacle facing women in attaining equality is attitude: their own self esteem as well as the attitude of employers towards them. Some women are not able to work full time. But this is no reason not to gain better skills. Employers have the same negative attitude. We must combat this.

>> Women role models are needed also for employers

If someone says we have a pocket of isolation: check how and why that is.

>> Dig under the surface and keep checking the facts that come up

The idea is to have the whole work force evolving, new comers must take low skill jobs but no worker should remain stuck in a low skill position.

Skilling people is great but you need people for basic jobs and if you look at Northampton's demographic statistics, we will need and we should have immigration: new women and new men moving into our area. People should evolve professionally to make place for new comers

Be flexible however difficult it is with the rigidities of European Commission projects. We were superseded by events and some changes in the projects had to be done: when that happens, one needs to be flexible so that the project's actions remain relevant.

Keep going, do not stop at targets >> progressing is good