The Municipality of Vantaa, in Finland, has partnered with the Laurea University of Applied Sciences on the implementation of the SMILE project, which focuses on promoting the integration of migrant families through a community-based approach involving and connecting families, schools, NGOs and local public services.

Vantaa, a city within the metropolitan area of Helsinki with a population of 240,000 people, has a large proportion of inhabitants with a migrant background, while about 23% of the population speak a foreign language as their mother tongue. Vantaa’s municipality has been working for a long time with the communities and the dynamic local network of migrant-led NGOs to promote integration and inclusion of the migrant population, as migrants face more difficulties than the host population in terms of accessing employment and education.

SMILE is focused on three districts of Vantaa with the largest migrant population: Myyrmäki, Koivukylä and Hakunila. Vantaa has previously received funding, through a loan from the CEB, and the activities under SMILE add to and complement the purpose of the loan-funded activities.

The project comprises three components. The first component, focusing on employment, will connect the migrant-led NGOs with the municipal employment services to develop, implement and evaluate a pilot model on job coaching for migrants and their families. The second component, related to education, will improve the capacity of schools to engage with migrant families, and promote partnerships between schools, NGOs, faith-based communities, and families.

Finally, SMILE will establish new dialogue channels between migrant communities and Vantaa’s services.

The objectives of SMILE are:

- To improve inclusion of migrants in Vantaa
- To strengthen and create new partnerships between migrant-led NGO’s and municipal employment services
- To support migrant children’s learning and integration through creating new cooperation and communication between families, communities, and schools
- To develop new dialogue channels between migrant communities and Vantaa’s services

The expected results include:

- Develop, implement and evaluate a participatory pilot model for NGOs, municipalities and migrant families
- Provide job coaching to 375 migrants and their families, with the goal of 50% of them accessing employment, entrepreneurship, education, or training
- Strengthen schools’ capacities and know-how in 3 districts, through 36 workshops, physical and digital learning activities, working with 255 individuals from migrant communities

The project is funded under the Partnerships and Financing for Migrant Inclusion (PAFMI) - a wider agreement between the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) and the European Commission (Directorate General for Home Affairs) whose purpose is to improve the inclusion of migrants in EU Member States through the development of new partnerships and new forms of financing.