

EQUINET Training
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Access to Rights: Information for all as the ultimate goal

The importance of accessing rights, how fundamental it is to communicate in a proper way what equality bodies are doing, why and whom they are there for and how EU citizens can employ them at best for legal advice and assistance to redress individual rights to equal treatment. These, together with strategies and experiences on how to raise awareness about the existence of national and specialized equality bodies, how to disseminate the information on equal rights as well as how to increase the culture of rights have been some of the key areas covered by the Equinet training on Access to Rights, which took place at the Dublin Castle on 28 and 29 April 2009. Representatives from specialised equality bodies from across Europe had a two-day exchange whereby they could compare ideas, views and measures in the field of raising awareness about discrimination. Perspectives of NGOs, social partners, trade unions and information centres were also presented by selected experts during the training event, providing an opportunity for exchange and discussion with representatives from equality bodies.

During the training opening and welcome, Richard Fallon (acting head of the Irish Equality Authority) and Chila Van der Bas (Chair of the Equinet Board) highlighted the importance of a common European platform and network for equality bodies and emphasized that, in times of economic crisis, equality must be a catalyst for change and improvement rather than a factor to be neglected or left behind. Chila van der Bas, on behalf of Equinet, apart from stressing the importance of access to rights for all, also reasserted the Network's support to the Irish Equality Authority in view of the recent budget cutbacks and, more generally, to all equality bodies which are currently facing difficult situations.

During the presentations given by the keynote speakers and during the workshops, some fundamental points were made:

- 1) The critical role of information which must enable people to access their rights and to achieve a full citizenship (information for all).
- 2) The subsequent need for effective and well-targeted campaigns both towards groups and people who are being discriminated against and towards those who are perpetrating discrimination.



- 3) The ability to address the media with meaningful and powerful messages concerning the fight against discrimination.
- 4) The urgent need to cope with multiple discrimination and to exclude any possible hierarchy in perceptions of discrimination (i.e. that no discrimination is worse than the other).
- 5) The leading role of equality bodies in tackling discrimination and how to let citizens and minority groups know that they are there to provide assistance.
- 6) The importance of cooperation among different organisations and stakeholders in times of economic downturn.
- 7) The need for training on equal treatment and anti-discrimination legislation.
- 8) The importance of establishing a virtuous circle whereby, when a “good” court decision is made in a case of discrimination, it is followed by other such decisions thus setting a precedent that will be binding for judges in future litigations.

The right to information as a human right

“The first human right is the right to information”, said Claire Lesko, from the British Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). “It is of the utmost importance that we learn to communicate effectively to citizens knowledge about their rights: we need an intelligence approach that involves understanding our audience before producing guidances and organising campaigns. We need to look for specific tactics to reach our objectives. For instance”, she concluded, “more than 50% of disabled people would not recognize themselves as being disabled, so there is no point in tailoring a campaign which is generally meant to tackle discrimination on the ground of disability. It is therefore necessary to target specific categories such as blinds or deafs. More generally, we want people to think that human rights do not only concern developing countries, but are also violated in our everyday lives and in our own societies”.

As far as raising awareness about discrimination is concerned, Stephanie Seydoux from the *Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations et pour l'Égalité* (HALDE) in France presented the experience of their e-learning tools, aimed at the general public and in particular at students in schools so that they can interactively learn the meaning of the word ‘discrimination’. “On our website, we have hundreds of pages with multimedia material, quizzes and exercises to challenge people on their ideas and prejudices concerning discrimination. Speaking about campaigns – she summed up – it is necessary to think of them as being not only oriented towards victims of discrimination but also towards perpetrators”.



Multiple discrimination is the issue

“We have to astonish the media with our campaigns and to provoke them, so that they pay attention to our messages”, stated Beatrice Achaleke, from the International Centre for Black Women’s Perspectives (AFRA). “We set up a campaign called ‘Black Austria’ – she explained – with the purpose of challenging the stereotype of the prototypical Austrian being white and blond and with blue eyes. We wanted to make our audience realize that you can be Austrian even being black. The campaign was a success. The key point I want to make is that we have to check the language we are speaking and to find alternatives and proper ways to convey our messages. Other than that, in our everyday activities we have realized that multiple discrimination is a key issue to deal with: once in my office came a black woman. But she was not only black, she was also lesbian. And she was not only black and lesbian, she was also a wheelchair user. Can you imagine how many forms of discrimination she is suffering from? We have to fight for people such as that woman”.

The same goes for disability: “We should never create a hierarchy of disabilities and we must bear in mind that no disability is more important than the other”, stressed Siobhane Kane from Inclusion Ireland, an association that aims at improving the conditions of people with mental disabilities. “Our goal must be to produce information and documents in as many formats as possible so that they can be accessible for a larger public”, she stated.

The role of equality bodies and Equinet

In this context what can be the role of the equality bodies and Equinet in raising awareness on access to rights? “Equality bodies can promote initiatives to bring together all NGOs which are dealing with discrimination”, proposed Annette Sjodin from the Swedish Federation on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights, “and Equinet can, to a certain extent, help to find the resources for such a common platform which, as already mentioned, will have to concentrate above all on multiple discrimination. Finally we must think of ourselves as being proactive rather than reactive”, she concluded.

“It’s difficult to reach everyone and we don’t even want to reach everyone”, Beatrice Achaleke underlined. “I want that those who need our services sooner or later know that we are there for them, to help them in issuing their complaints”.

Another important point which was made has to do with the need for cooperation among different stakeholders. Dolores Kandelin Mogard, from the Swedish trade Union Akademikerförbundet (SSR) and Marieke Arnou from the Belgian Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to



Racism presented two meaningful experiences. “In Sweden we managed to set up a network, called All Clear, composed of 29 trade unions and the Swedish Federation for LGBT rights”, Ms. Kandelin Mogard explained. “In close cooperation with universities, NGOs and with the Equality Ombudsman, we created an atmosphere of confidence which has encouraged individuals to trust this project. Educate, educate, educate: this is the key to succeed”.

“In Belgian Flanders – Ms Arnou explained – we have established a very well-developed network of Equal Treatment Bureaus which, in connection with the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism and with local governments, would assist victims of discrimination, implement prevention actions and stimulate local actor to adopt anti-discrimination policies. In addition, we have recently initiated the use of an electronic registration system of cases which can be utilised both by the Centre and by the Equal Treatment Bureaus, thus providing uniformity, professionalism and detailed data reporting even in different cities and areas. Apart from the geographical partnership – she added – we implemented exchanges of training and expertise on work, education, media and policies, for instance with trade unions. Finally we set up programmes of discrimination partnerships which focused on different minorities”.

Conclusions

To conclude, some of the further challenges put forward during the training were:

- 1) To overcome the concept of norms.
- 2) To convey to the majority why it enjoys privileges rather than only teaching minorities why they are discriminated.
- 3) To strive for increasingly equal societies, which means higher standards of life quality for all.
- 4) To avoid establishing hierarchies among different types and grounds of discrimination and to always work bearing in mind a multi-discrimination approach.
- 5) To work in close cooperation in the fight against all forms of discrimination thus increasingly influencing, in a more effective way, the European legislation and the EU decision processes in the field.
- 6) To include even the most marginalised groups in anti-discrimination campaigns (for example Roma communities).

As a closing remark Anne Gaspard, the executive director of Equinet, emphasized how “especially at such times when public resources are limited, we need to act together in a complementary combination of roles and organisations between specialised equality bodies,



NGOs, social partners and public bodies to allow for effective access to rights of all citizens and take equality in practice forward across European societies.

