

Equinet Executive Board Meeting I
16 March 2017
Warsaw, Poland

VENUE: The Office of the Polish Commissioner of Human Rights, Długa Street 23/25, Warsaw

ATTENDANCE	
Board Members	Equinet Secretariat
<p>Evelyn Collins (ECo) - <i>Chair</i> Anna Blaszcak (AB) Sandra Konstatzky (SK) Kalliopi Lykovardi (KL) Petr Polak (PP) Kirsi Pimiä (KP) Tena Šimonović Einwalter (TSE) Patrick Charlier (PC) – <i>morning via Skype</i></p> <p>Expert Advisor to the Board: Niall Crowley (NC)</p>	<p>Anne Gaspard (AG) - <i>Executive Director</i> Tamas Kadar (TK) - <i>Head of Legal & Policy Team</i> Yannick Godin (YG) - <i>Finance & Administration Officer</i> Sarah Cooke O’Dowd (SCOD) - <i>Communication Officer</i> Jessica Machacova (JM) - <i>Membership and Policy Officer</i> Katrine Steinfeld (KS) - <i>Policy Officer/Gender Equality</i> Ingrid Egeland Thorsnes (IET)- <i>Policy and Communication Assistant (Trainee)</i></p>

Chair of the meeting: Evelyn Collins (ECo)

External evaluator John Tierney (JT) participated to relevant session via Skype

Apologies: Sarah Benichou (SB) - Board Member

Minutes: Ingrid Egeland Thorsnes (IET)

MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING

1. OPENING AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Following an introduction and board discussion with Adam Bodnar (Commissioner for Human Rights) and Sylwia Spurek (Deputy Commissioner) about the latest situation and challenges of the work in Poland, ECo opened the Board meeting at 10:30.

The proposed agenda for the meeting was reviewed and agreed upon by participants, with a few adjustments: The conference on migration (agenda point 5.3) will be discussed at the next board meeting in June. Membership updates concerning Unia in Belgium will be given by PC during morning (agenda point 4.4).

2. APPROVAL OF DRAFT MINUTES of previous Meeting

The draft Minutes of Board Meeting (8 December 2016) were reviewed and agreed.

DECISION: Minutes of Board Meeting 8 December 2016 approved by the Board and will be made available to Members on the restricted Members' area of the Equinet website.

3. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

3.1 Equinet External Evaluation 2016

- The report of the external evaluation of Equinet's work and activities in 2016 was presented by contracted consultant John Tierney (JT).
- **Process:** JT noted that the evaluation process and survey started later than in previous years and had a lower response rate from the members this year. **PP** suggested that this could be related to lack of resources, and that there might be some repetitive risk to conduct this survey evaluation process every year. Also, **KP** suggested that the timing of the survey (around end-of-year holidays) might have an impact and that staff of EBs might not feel they have so much feedback to give after one, maybe two meetings a year (since previous consultation).
- **Main conclusions of evaluation:** Equinet is doing well, is well positioned and knows what it's there for and delivers outputs of high quality.
- **Challenge:** For Equinet to find its position in a consciously more complex context, and how to sustain its unique added-value and specificity in relation to other similar cooperation platforms and networks at European level, this will call for continued *creative leadership*.
- **Points of improvement:** Try to reach out to the junior and executive staff of the equality bodies and to improve the relationship and cooperation with the EU Parliament.
- Questions from Board members concerning "the stories that fill the gaps" – the role of EB and Equinet to tell the stories between individual cases and the statistical evidence.

3.2 Preparations Equinet 10 years Anniversary 2017

- **Objectives:** The Board supported the overall draft Concept with the suggested objectives, focus on both challenges and main achievements.
- **Draft Programme:**

- The Board welcomed the prospect to invite several **government representatives** at ministerial level, to contribute a (supportive) national governmental perspective to the programme (by one minister or as part of a government panel if more than one minister accept invitation). This would bring a valuable political dimension to the discussions. Ministers suggested to be targeted for invitation included: Austria, Estonia, Belgium, Finland, Ireland and Malta. Indeed, Board members raised the concerns whether in the current context ministers are genuinely engaged in equality, and to ensure we invite ministers highlighting support for the work of non-discrimination and equality bodies. It will also be important to ensure that the perspective of civil society is present, for instance through active participation by the NGOs representatives at the event, ensuring contributions to the discussions and in Q&A sessions.
- **NC** also suggested more representation from the EBs, in addition to Chair and Adam Bodnar, with particularly focus on consequences of austerity.
- **PP** pointed to the fact that we have no representative from the **judicial branch**. In this context, **SK** suggested the names of Judge Maria Berger of the CJEU, and TSE the Croatian judges to the CJEU and the ECtHR.
- **Language/interpretation:** access to interpretation for the event would make it more inclusive of a wider range of Members and high representatives within NEBs. However, the budget implications and costs were recognised as limiting consideration.
- **External sponsors:** The Board did not support making an approach to **corporate sponsors**, and recommended rather seeking additional funding from foundations or possibly Member States or permanent representations to the EU in Brussels.
- **Videos:** The Board warmly welcomed **the proposal of videos** to communicate about the work of NEBs and Equinet, and **TSE** suggested different perspectives for the videos:
 - A narrative of EBs' work on the ground, told particularly from the victim's perspective – could be largely compiled based on existing videos from Members to be edited and subtitled.
 - Interviews with Equinet stakeholders (incl. civil society, international organisations) in order to show where we fit in and illustrate what Equinet/NEBs' contribution and reputation is.
 - The voice of those people involved in building Equinet and Members involved in the daily work of the Network (former Chairs, engaged member organisations and leadership, etc.)

3.3 Supporting development of Standards for NEBs: next steps

- **Review of ECRI GPR No 2:** **TSE** informed the meeting that the ECRI Working Group will meet at end of March, and is expected to finalise the two documents - the draft text and explanatory memorandum – to be presented to the ECRI Plenary to 'test the waters' before the Seminar with specialised bodies (equality bodies) at the end of May. The draft GPR text, which is very ambitious and detailed, is expected to be sent to the Equality bodies for consultation prior to the May Seminar.
- **Prospect of FRA Legal Opinion:**
 - **ECo** and **AG** informed the meeting that FRA was interested to consider the preparation of a FRA Legal Opinion concerning standards for Equality Bodies, and has asked for a formal response and confirmation from the Equinet network whether such an Opinion would be helpful. Other possibilities for support would be for the FRA to refer to the

Equinet Working Paper in its work, emphasizing the need for resources and strengthening NEBs, etc.

The following comments were made:

- Some concern was expressed about the potential for FRA to write an opinion, largely based on the Paris Principles, which could undermine Equinet's messages on the need for standards for equality bodies.
 - **PC** suggested that such an Opinion might help raise the visibility of equality bodies with the FRA.
 - **ECo** said it would be good to encourage FRA to refer to our Working Paper and standards for EBs consistently. Timing and process for any Opinion would need to be considered carefully.
 - **TK** suggested to possibly not rush for an opinion from FRA, to ensure it can build on the ECRI new GPR 2, and on any further Equinet work.
 - It was agreed to consider further at the June Board meeting, after discussion at the Strategic discussion planned on Standards with members on 3 May 2017.
- **Proposal Members Strategic Meeting 2017 on Developing Standards and possible side event with external stakeholders:** The potential for a side meeting on standards at Human Dimension Implementation Meeting was discussed briefly. **TSE** noted that these events are very complex, political and formal.
 - **Working Paper on Standards:** Members could be encouraged to translate the Working Paper in the context of the strategic meeting on standards.
 - **Research on budgets and mandates of NEBs:** Board members were encouraged to draw the tender to the attention of possible interested researchers. **KS** will also follow-up with some researchers, and ask those who declined whether they would have been able to take the task with some adjustments in either timeline/scope/financial for future reference in case changes are needed.
 - **Austrian Presidency:** **SK** informed the meeting that there was potential for the Minister to talk about standards in June at the EU Council and it may be helpful to invite the State Secretary to speak at the 10-year anniversary conference.

3.4 Contribution to the EU Agenda

- **Policy Working Group:** Following discussion at the last Working Group meeting, it is proposed that the WG will produce an Equinet Perspective on the link between equality bodies and ombuds type institutions as a second output of their work under the Equinet Work Plan 2017.

DECISION: The topic selected for the planned Perspective to focus on the link between equality bodies and ombuds institutions was approved by the Board.

- **IDAHOT:** Secretariat and Unia are working closely on to get an invitation and to at least promote relevant NEBs work and Equinet publications.
- **EC engagement and EU Work-Life Balance:** The Work-Life Balance Package will be presented in late April by the European Commission. Considering the potential of relevant content of this proposal for equality bodies, Equinet Secretariat will initiate engagement with the responsible service of the European Commission.

- **Freedom of Movement Directive:** TK informed of meeting with the Commission. The Commission is currently considering the best ways to support the implementation of the new Directive. National entities have been appointed for the enforcement of the directive, however not all countries have such bodies, and the Commission has started infringement proceedings against a number of Member States. Furthermore, Luxemburg, Portugal, Romania and UK have not yet designated a responsible body. Additional resources are not always granted to those appointed, and the European Commission will pay special attention to this in its monitoring. A meeting for Article 4 bodies (including 12 equality bodies) designated under Directive 2014/54/EU will be convened by the Commission in Brussels on 27 April 2017.
- **Accessibility Act:** JM prepared a one-pager on the focus on the most important points of the act. The act is already limited, not including the built environment. There are also unanswered questions concerning enforcement and access to justice not mentioned. The Internal Market Parliamentary Committee now discussing the act.

3.5 Stakeholders cooperation in Equality and Human Rights

Strategic cooperation:

- The work and purpose of Cooperation platforms FRA-Council of Europe-ENNHRI-Equinet will be reviewed in the spring at a leadership meeting of the partners involved.
- FRA suggested to consider to formalise cooperation with ENNHRI and Equinet, which is a possibility under their statutes.

Follow-up: Joint meeting FRA, ENNHRI, Equinet and Council of Europe in May. Main lines to take for the meeting to be circulated to the Board members in advance, based on review of the platforms.

4. GOVERNANCE AND FINANCE OF THE NETWORK

4.1 Management report – Equinet Accounts

YG informed the Board about the final situation of Equinet Accounts for the year 2016 (closed and audited) and the fact that EC Grant 2017 Budget was approved. YG also introduced the letter from the external auditors encouraging the Board to pursue the efforts of erasing the debt accumulated over the years and building up a social reserve fund (recommended under Belgian employment framework). The Network has been spending markedly less than budgeted in 2016 as in the previous year, thereby coming close to already erasing the debt. Particular attention needs to be given to closer monitoring of finances throughout the year to best (re)allocate resources in due time, since moving large amounts to other cost headings is possible but requires prior EC approval.

Decision: The Board noted the content of the letter from the auditors.

4.2 Planning Equinet AGM and Board Elections

This planning process will be discussed and reviewed in more detail at next board meeting (June). A call to Members for Board Elections candidates is expected to be launched in June.

4.3 Update Moderators Working Groups 2017

The Board formally noted and supported the practice of co-moderation introduced and piloted in the case in two Equinet Working Groups (Gender Equality and Equality Law).

4.4 Membership updates

- **Belgium: PC** informed about recent challenging and stormy period for Unia in Belgium, in the context of recent attacks by the new minister in charge of equal opportunities in her first public statements and some politicians favouring a divided rather than an inter-federal equality body. Concerning the Achbita Case, Unia decided to take a positive interpretation to media from a strategic point of view, whilst acknowledging some internal disappointment in view of the judgement.
- **Romania:** Legislative proposal from MP to abolish the equality body, at first instance (in the House of Deputies), was not considered within the time limit which means it was accepted and sent to the Senate which dismissed the proposal. However, the fact that the media had reported that the EB would be abolished could have a negative impact on its reputation.
- **Italy:** UNAR Director resigned following compromising allegations made in a TV documentary and media coverage in Italy. There is uncertainty about next steps and what will follow for UNAR.
- **Austria:** A new Ombudsperson for disabilities is expected to be appointed in April 2017.
- **Greece:** There have been changes in the equality law and also in Ombudsman structure, - it now has a more concrete focus on equality with a new department created. KL as Deputy Ombudsman.
- **Finland:** New Ombudsman for Gender Equality appointed - Mr Jukka Maarianvaara – and expected to start formally in April.
- **Croatia:** On 11 and 12 May, the Ombudsman institution will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Croatian legislation with an international conference, where ECo will speak on behalf of Equinet.
- **The Centre for Gender Equality of Iceland** could be a potential future member of Equinet. First contacts and introduction will be established with the institution of Iceland.

Follow-up: Initiate contact with the Centre, and follow-up discussion and potential membership application interest at next board meeting(s).

5. OPERATIONAL ISSUES

5.1 Equinet Cluster on Research

JM Informed about the background preliminary preparations (webpages search of EBs and cooperation with ENAR and FRA) in view of the kick-off of this Equinet cluster on research. The first meeting of the Cluster is expected to take place in June. The Board suggested to find an Equality Body with relevant experience in the field of data and research, interested and willing to lead/moderate the work and meetings of the Cluster.

5.2 Equinet Conference on Positive Duties

KS informed about the planning of the conference and some challenges with ensuring the involvement of national authorities at the event.

NEXT MEETINGS

Strategic Meeting on Standards (3 May) and Conference Positive Duties (4 May), Brussels

Equinet Board Meeting, 14 June 2017 (Brussels)

Equinet Board Meeting, 14 Sept 2017 (Belfast)

10th Anniversary Events (10 Oct) and Equinet AGM (11 Oct), Brussels

=== The Chair closed the Board Meeting at 15:45 ===