**Fundamental Rights Forum 2016 - Working Group 4: Social inclusion in the context of the Euro 2020 strategy: what is missing?**

22 June 2016

*Making equality, diversity and non-discrimination central to the achievement of social inclusion*

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this Working Group. As Chair of Equinet, the European Network of Equality bodies, I want to make three points on the theme of making equality, diversity and non-discrimination central to the achievement of social inclusion.

**First**, and given that the overall theme of the Workshop is social inclusion in the context of the Euro 2020 strategy: what is missing?, I want to make the point that issues of equality, diversity and non-discrimination, and the contribution of equality bodies at national level could/should be made central to the **implementation** of the Strategy, in particular in respect of the priority relating to Inclusive growth, with its ambition to foster a high employment economy delivering economic, social and territorial cohesion.

There is a recognition at EU level that equality policies can support growth and that growth cannot be achieved in a society where discrimination and exclusion exists; that equality legislation is and should be a catalyst for growth because it seeks to protect the most vulnerable and can be a driver for both economic and social inclusion, and that, particularly in times of crisis, human rights and non-discrimination principles should be taken into account when designing and implementing growth policies.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The same will be important in the European Pillar of Social Rights, currently the subject of consultation – equality and non-discrimination should be essential principles to assist/support Member States to focus on the needs and challenges in the field of employment and social policies and link with the targets of the Europe 2020 strategy.

However, the reality is that at national level, relatively few equality bodies are engaged with national authorities on their implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy and there is scope for better, indeed renewed, focus on addressing inequalities. An Equinet survey in 2014[[2]](#footnote-2) showed that where there is engagement, this is based on a shared understanding that inclusive growth needs to be based on the elimination of discrimination, consideration of diversity and the achievement of equality, and that the employment targets of the strategy will not be met in the context of discrimination and inequality in the labour market.

The recommendations contained in the report of our survey focus on the need to champion a focus on equality, diversity and non-discrimination in the Europe 2020 strategy and on the inclusion of equality stakeholders, including equality bodies in its implementation, ensuring that it is meaningful to those outside of Brussels. It also recommends bringing an equality focus to the forefront in the Structural and Investment funds; in the National Reform Programmes at Member State level; in the Annual Growth Survey, in the Flagship initiatives, and in Country Specific Recommendations at European level.

**Secondly,** I want say that discrimination can be a causal factor for poverty and social exclusion, that poverty and social exclusion can increase the risk of discrimination and can contribute to underreporting of discrimination. There is a need/ a challenge to further explore the links between poverty and discrimination, the bases for both and their interrelationship, as well as the implications for policy in this area.

Anti-poverty policy needs to be sure to take diversity into account and to contribute to full equality in practice; and equality policy and practices need to recognise that the barriers experienced by individuals/groups protected under equality legislation can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion and bring a particular focus to seek to address the poverty and social exclusion experienced by a range of equality groups – at EU and national level and in the work of national equality bodies.

In respect of non-discrimination, making progress on the adoption of the long awaited Horizontal Directive – to level the protections in the areas of goods, facilities and services (including health care, housing, education) to grounds beyond race and gender – would reinforce the need for action against discrimination in these areas.

Equal treatment of course is a minimum standard but we have to go beyond the concept of fundamental rights if we want to achieve social inclusion....it is vital, if we are serious about social inclusion, then we focus on how to achieve full equality in practice.

The **third point** I want to emphasise is the contribution of equality bodies and the wider equality infrastructure, including NGOs, to social inclusion. It is clear that equality bodies can contribute to growth by reinforcing social cohesion as well as ensuring the implementation of antidiscrimination law, specifically in respect of the groups covered by equal treatment legislation.

Equinet has recently published a Perspective on the contribution of equality bodies to the promotion, respect and fulfilment of economic and social rights.[[3]](#footnote-3) This demonstrated that they provide a non-discrimination foundation to economic and social rights in a range of ways, in areas such asemployment, equal pay, labour market programmes and in relation to public services in education, welfare reform, housing and health fields.

This contribution can be amplified where the remit of the equality body includes socio-economic status as a ground for complaints or where the equal treatment legislation goes beyond non-discrimination to impose positive duties on public authorities to pay due regard to the need to promote equality.

Equality bodies of course focus on the need to eliminate discrimination but also recognise diversity and its practical implications for those experiencing social exclusion and to pursue ambition over minimum standards in looking to achieve full equality in practice. The potential of equality bodies to effect change means there must be a concern to ensure these are fit for purpose; equality bodies have the potential to support progress towards a more equal Europe, towards social inclusion for all, yet there are concerns that some equality bodies are working in very difficult circumstances. Equinet has just published a Working Paper on the need for standards for equality bodies[[4]](#footnote-4) – to address issues of mandate, independence and effectiveness – to encourage both a focus and some action on this at EU level.

This would certainly help makeequality, diversity and non-discrimination central to the achievement of social inclusion.

1. As evidenced for example by the conclusions of the [Equality Summit *Promoting Equality for Growth*](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/equalitysummit2012_conclusions_en.pdf) (Nov 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Niall Crowley (2014), [Equality bodies and the Europe 2020 Strategy](http://www.equineteurope.org/Equality-Bodies-and-the-Europe) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Equinet (2015), [Equality bodies contributing to the protection, respect and fulfilment of economic and social rights](http://www.equineteurope.org/Equality-Bodies-contributing-to)  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Equinet (2016), [Equinet Working Paper on developing standards for equality bodies](http://www.equineteurope.org/Equinet-Working-Paper-on-Developing-Standards-for-Equality-Bodies) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)