

Building Equal Cities

Promoting Equality and
Addressing Discrimination
at the Local Level

Conference Synthesis Report



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Event booklet: [Here](#)

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Introduction

On the 25th and 26th October 2021, Equinet organised an online Conference to explore how equality and non-discrimination are conceived and implemented at the local level within municipalities and cities across Europe. The Conference created an opportunity for national equality bodies to discuss with relevant actors how they can better cooperate and promote equality to tackle discrimination at the local level together. The presentations, conversations, and exchanges that took place during the conference led to rich outcomes which have been summarised below.

Background

The Conference was opened by the Chair of Equinet, who provided insights regarding rights protection at the local level. There was an immediate acknowledgement of the gap in knowledge on local level issues and the lack of coordination between equality bodies and local level actors. This confirms that it is extremely important **to enhance relations and build bridges** between the different levels of government. Essentially, local authorities and grassroots organisations were identified as key stakeholders that are best positioned to empower citizens and raise awareness of their rights. Additionally, local authorities are more accessible due to proximity. Therefore, guaranteeing their presence and establishing strong connections with them will ensure good sets of data can be obtained. Reliable and accurate data provide equality bodies with a true picture of discrimination, which they can use to inform local, national and European policymakers.

The role of equality bodies at the regional and local level

During this session, the nature of equality bodies was discussed as organisations that can ensure local-level engagement. Identified as a central component to the protection of equality, a focus was placed on the **further development of regional offices and efficient coordination** between different regions and local areas. While in some countries such as in Austria, the central office by itself has more difficulties to effectively address all the needs at the local level, regional equality body offices are better placed to overcome these barriers by participating frequently in local events and building stronger relationships with local authorities, companies, and other duty bearers. Furthermore, the importance of a tailored national strategy on equality was highlighted, as was the need for an impact-based approach with a

reporting cycle to ensure that national equality plans are not only successfully implemented but also responding to regional needs where appropriate.

The important role of equality bodies in **mediating at the local level** was discussed. In France, the national equality body ensures that it has allocated delegates to work locally and in proximity with citizens. Delegates steer their work by meeting citizens, mediating disputes, and proposing actions. Through this mediation, it has been found that equality bodies can create a dialogue with the perpetrator that can then encourage the offender to change their practices and enhance their understanding. Other actions also involve interventions at local schools through the use of workshops and by speaking at various awareness-raising events. Furthermore, creating an office at the local level was also found to be beneficial as it increases accessibility for local citizens, this ensures that victims of discrimination know where to go if they need support or information.

The European framework and local-level engagement

During this session, speakers shared key insights about the work of the European Committee of the Regions and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency in implementing equality policies and tackling inequalities at the local level. Several issues were identified as challenges and barriers to effectively addressing discrimination across Europe. The gaps in relation to the grounds covered by the [EU Employment and Occupation Directive 2000/78/EC \(age, disability, religion or belief and sexual orientation\)](#) were highlighted as an obstacle to tackling inequalities and which produced a **fragmented approach to equality**. Additionally, the widespread use of hate speech in public debates on social media, coupled with Covid-19, has resulted in heightened discrimination within cities in recent years. Speakers underlined the increasing importance of acknowledging the key role of regional and local actors who must be placed at the heart of EU strategies. They highlighted the potential of regional authorities for working to prevent discrimination by playing a prominent role in training and education. However, to assist with this, it was noted that regional authorities should be recognised as strategic partners and be provided with proper EU support in relation to funds and resources. Furthermore, speakers emphasised the benefits of **improving relationships between all stakeholders**, especially regional and local bodies, in order to guarantee effective implementation of EU directives and legislation addressing discrimination.

Local-level actors are essential for ensuring that individuals and groups facing discrimination can enjoy their rights in full. They are best placed to **monitor** the situation on the ground, develop good practices, identify new policy needs and gaps, and act against hate speech and hate crime within schools, housing, public spaces, and access to public services. The Fundamental Rights Agency developed a [new framework for enforcing rights locally](#), this framework identifies how to become and holistically function as a Human Rights City by building strong foundations through EU instruments. Additionally, it was found essential to equip cities with the necessary tools by **mainstreaming equality** and human rights across municipal work, conducting capacity and training sessions, and **building partnerships** with national equality bodies. National equality bodies can provide advice to policymakers and training to professionals in relation to education, healthcare, and child protection through Human Rights Education. To achieve this effectively, Member States must increase the support between equality bodies and local authorities and provide the necessary resources for progress.

Panel session on challenges and opportunities of local-level work on equality

A clear starting point of the session was recognising the need for collaboration when implementing equality policies on the local level and examining how stakeholders could complement each other through their respective roles when ensuring equality is protected at the local level.

Several concrete challenges were identified by panelists. First of all, attention was drawn to the difficulties faced by some municipalities when realising their **independence** from central authorities. This results in limited legislative powers which can pose barriers when trying to implement good practices. Some panelists pointed out that cities need to be equipped with pre-existing tools such as policy methodologies, auditing tools, and impact assessments in order to be truly effective key players. Furthermore, current **human and financial resources** given to equality bodies, regional departments and local level actors have also proven not to be enough. Difficulties associated with the lack of resources can impact disaggregated data collection, accessibility, and the ability of each party to implement adequate policies and programs.

Equality bodies also face several challenges. For smaller equality bodies, without regional offices, it can be hard to reach a **sustainable approach** to addressing local-level discrimination. Conversely, in some countries where there are multiple regional-level equality bodies, the separate offices might have to work with different political standings, making it difficult to create a **cohesive framework** of local-level cooperation against discrimination. At the same time, it was underlined that equality measures do not work in one domain or a vacuum, therefore there is not one single policy that can fit all measures and all discriminated groups or grounds.

On opportunities encountered, some panelists proposed sharing knowledge and best practices amongst other cities and other EU institutions to remove tunnel vision and shift perspective to see what is being overlooked. Equality bodies should engage with this process by **monitoring local governments measures**, providing suggestions for policy improvements, and advice on how to reach more citizens to further bolster their efforts. Furthermore, it was highlighted that local authorities can assist with equality and inclusion campaigning, as this is better enriched through **dialogue** with citizens. At this level, there is a greater opportunity to enhance public awareness in relation to data collection and access to remote areas.

Participants stressed the need for further engagement of stakeholders to ensure marginalized group voices are heard at local elections. In this regard, equality bodies can act as mediators and knowledge hubs to provide expertise for local authorities. Finally, the conference noted the potential of the [European Charter for Equality](#) by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions for creating opportunities. Following the Charter, local-level actors should create a local equality action plan which addresses some of the Charter articles. Priority within these plans should respond to pressing needs such as equality in decision making for women of all ages, and cases of multiple discrimination.

Exchange of best practices: Identifying what works well at the local level

During the second day of the Conference, experts shared their good practices to promote equality at the local level, enhance collaboration and develop more effective non-discrimination policies. We asked for discussion on targeted areas to cover a wide variety of groups and individuals at the local level. The main takeaways from each area are gathered in the following lines.

Cities promoting disability rights

The city of Warsaw won the EU 2020 Access City Award, for the implementation of accessibility practices in a short space of time and through the involvement and cooperation of people with disabilities within the city. They achieved this by changing their infrastructure, policies, and implementing special standards to meet the needs of people with disabilities. Additionally, the public transport was transformed to make trains, buses and trams accessible to all.

A key element in the adoption of a policy dedicated to people with disabilities was the requirement of understanding the residents and **listening** to them. To accomplish this, they used various research methods to obtain data, making it easier to plan actions. Ultimately, the changes made were beneficial to multiple parties because they undertook consultations with Non-Governmental Organisations that represented different groups. The discussions were seen to strengthen relationships with other organisations, enhance cooperation, establish high accessibility recommendation requirements, and introduce accessibility to all mainstream actions including the architecture of the city and the digital sector.

Cities fighting racism

Cities are **motors of diversity**, playing a key role in implementing anti-discrimination legislation. They are very knowledgeable and are very well placed to tackle racism as they are key to the provision of public services. However, local governments face challenges on institutional, legal, practical, cultural and resource capacity gaps which are exacerbated by pre-existing levels of racism within the city. Acknowledging, analysing, and defining these barriers followed by the deployment of policies and measures to overcome them, should be the main priority, and this will maximise cities' potential for positive and inclusive change.

The European Coalition of Cities against Racism (ECCAR) has designed a 10-point plan of action to cover all issues raised by the [EU Anti-racism Action Plan](#), which can also be used as a base for National Action Plans. It is designed as a source of inspiration and is put into action through the [ECCAR 'Toolkit for Equality'](#). It ensures **mutual learning** and mutual progression of local-level authorities, in relevant fields such as equality data collection on hate crime reporting, diverse recruitment, and developing participatory practices for all. ECCAR has also established working groups in the fields of antigypsyism, antisemitism, anti-Muslim racism, and the UN Decade for People of African Descent & Colonial Heritage. They have provided an opportunity to discuss both good and inadequate practices in specific fields. NGOs and national level actors, such as equality bodies, are invited to join the working groups to better understand the needs at the local level and how they can be supported through the actions of other bodies at the national level. As national governments are designing the framework that helps local authorities to act, local-level perspectives must be considered, their roles strengthened, and provided with the necessary resources to produce adequate reports and data.

Cities protecting LGBTIQ rights

In Hungary, despite that there is a strong legal and institutional framework on equal treatment and the promotion of equal opportunities, the explicit protection of sexual orientation and gender identity is not included in legislation or the content of equal opportunity programs. This, in addition to the current

hostile political climate against LGBTQI in Hungary, demands more comprehensive legislation and programs aiming to tackle discrimination in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity at the national and local levels.

To raise awareness about these issues, the Hungarian LGBT Alliance launched the *We are Here Campaign 2015-2016* to increase LGBTQI visibility outside the capital of Hungary and strengthen local LGBTQI groups. This helped to **foster dialogue** between local policy actors, universities, youth centers, high schools and LGBTQI groups. The main challenge to this will be sustainability. Additionally, in 2017 the local assembly of the Hungarian capital city of Budapest adopted the *Budapest Equal Opportunity Program 2017-2022*, which has resulted in the first-ever policy document in Hungary with a comprehensive approach to LGBTQI equality. The main problem faced is that despite a good understanding of the local issues for LGBTQI groups, there are very few intervention measures to deal with the identified problems.

Cities mainstreaming gender equality:

In 1988, the Basque Institute of the Woman (Emakunde) was created to lead gender equality policies in the Basque Country. Their main priority was to build their capacity to develop gender equality policies at the Regional Basque Government level.

They launched a Gender Equality Plan to help victims of violence against women through training and **awareness-raising** activities. They then began to promote coordinated and effective gender equality policies at the local level building on regional legislation for equality, and through an alliance with the Association of Basque Municipalities. The requirements of the Basque law called for gender equality bodies or units to have specific budget allocations, gender equality plans, sex-disaggregated statistics, training on gender equality, and **sex-balanced representation** in the executive and legislative bodies. Furthermore, through the alliance with the Association of Basque Municipalities, Emakunde developed the Virginia Woolf Basqueskola project in 2012, which created a space for Basque women, in the role of mayors and councillors, to network and share their experiences in local politics.

Sharing ideas and Building Bridges

During this session, the participants were randomly allocated into smaller discussion groups to promote conversation, bridge building, and the sharing of good practices. The breakout rooms were designed to address the following:

Working together to strengthen and promote equality at the local level

Participants in this session discussed the importance of cooperation. They highlighted the benefits of **finding internal allies** in local governments who could organise meetings, engage in projects and understand better the mechanics of internal decision-making. For example, it was noted that in Manchester (UK), a new panel of Disabled People's Organisations was funded by the Manchester mayor. The panel worked together with the national equality body to set up a local equality infrastructure and connect individuals with the political level as the panel meets regularly with the mayor. This can help increase accessibility at the ground level through local-level engagement and creating a dialogue between local actors and relevant partners such as equality bodies.

Successful collaboration and the roles of different actors and equality bodies

Within the discussion, some representatives from equality bodies acknowledged the value of local-level work and emphasised the importance of working with municipalities. While emphasis has been commonly placed on working at the central government level, there is growing recognition that through this method, the needs of local-level actors and citizens are not being met. This is because certain local issues are specific to the municipal level and not the national level. Therefore, equality bodies can play a role by providing national **equality data** to municipalities and encouraging local authorities to collect equality data where they can, as this is lacking. Furthermore, participants also highlighted the important role played by equality bodies and grassroots organisations in raising awareness.

Challenges and good practice examples

Responses showed that there are variations across the different equality grounds in relation to challenges and good practices. For grounds that are considered more familiar such as gender and race or ethnic origin, there was a higher level of organisation and service provision, and for grounds considered less visible such as disability and age, there were lower levels of policy structures and programmes already in place at the national level. This artificial **hierarchy of grounds** has a negative impact at the local level as it may pose an obstacle to the work of equality bodies and local actors on improving the protection against discrimination towards local citizens in key areas of life, irrespective of the ground. Moreover, the work of equality bodies is further complicated by the **lack of adequate resources**, resulting in some not having the tools to build a strong network with relevant local actors, even if they have local and regional offices.

Participants also mentioned a number of good practices promoting equality and tackling discrimination at the local level. For example, it was noted that in Croatia, the equality body in cooperation with the European Commission has conducted several **mappings of Roma communities at the local level**, which have contributed to an improved assessment of their needs and eventually, a fitter response in terms of integration policies and practices carried out by the Croatian and European institutions. In Germany, the national equality body does not have regional offices and therefore, it can be hard to reach a sustainable approach to addressing local level discrimination. In order to mitigate this issue, the equality body initiated a network of local-level NGOs to facilitate a medium of **peer exchange**, building bridges and strengthening cooperation between different actors.

Main takeaways

During the closing session, the main takeaways were highlighted. The discussions from the Conference demonstrated that there is a clear value for equality bodies in engaging with local authorities to increase contact with citizens. However, while it is very useful to have local level offices, this can often be seen as extremely difficult due to the **absence of necessary resources** and the **need for better coordination** and support. Therefore, any extension of the mandate of equality bodies should be complemented by resources and guaranteed through **increased standards**.

The Conference has also revealed **multiple paths for practical engagement** with different relevant stakeholders that will ensure that equality can be mainstreamed through all levels of government. The exchange of good practices, the emphasis on common goals, and the plans to engage citizens through debate are crucial to effectively design, develop and implement equality measures at the local level. Nonetheless, **each national context is unique**, only when this is acknowledged can the sharing of

best practices be adapted and utilised to build bridges between both government and non-government actors to guarantee equality for all discriminated groups.

Importantly, local actors must play a fundamental role in the non-discrimination architecture across Europe. It has become clear that some issues have less visibility at the national level, therefore local authorities are better placed to tackle these problems. Nevertheless, local actors and national equality bodies should not bear all responsibility for effective addressing of discrimination at the local level and there is a **need for collaboration with different duty bearers**. For instance, difficulties relating to the collection and disaggregation of data are relevant to all levels and require a targeted, cohesive, and comprehensive approach to producing strong and accurate statistics. To have a greater impact, responses need to be tailored to the needs of citizens, and the importance of collaboration cannot be overlooked.

Though many actors are required to ensure equality reaches the most marginalised within society, equality bodies play a fundamental role in ensuring learning opportunities, support, and resources are deployed and disseminated efficiently. To fulfil their potential, equality bodies need to be supported, mandated, and heard, if they are to assist individual local and regional level actors towards progress.