

Equality Summit
Paris, 29-30 September 2008

Conclusions

The French Presidency and the European Commission have held the 2nd Equality Summit, which brought together over 400 high-level participants from the member states and countries taking part in the Progress programme: representatives of national governments, managers in independent equality bodies, members of national and European parliaments, presidents of national and European non-governmental organisations, unions and employers' associations, businesses.

Following the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All in 2007, which gave new momentum to the fight against discrimination and the promotion of equality, the summit enabled delegates to discuss the main subjects in the "non-discrimination" part of the renewed social agenda adopted by the European Commission last July.

Firstly, the discussions established an assessment of the main areas of discrimination in access to education, employment, careers, professional training and access to goods and services. Secondly, they enabled the roles of certain bodies whose actions against discrimination could be reinforced to be analysed more closely, such as equality watchdogs (for the most part set up only recently), local actors and opinion leaders. Finally, they provided a chance to discuss the various tools available to us to change the reality on the ground, such as legislation and its future developments, voluntary action going beyond legislation and recent advances in data collection that give a better view of the phenomena of discrimination.

The principal messages that emerged from the debates were the following:

- **The proposed directive** adopted by the Commission on 2 July, aiming to improve legal protection for people who have suffered discrimination on the grounds of age, religion, disability or sexual orientation outside the world of work, constitutes a decisive advance in the consolidation of European legislation in the field of equal treatment and the fight against discrimination, whatever its basis and wherever it occurs. Although the omissions and limits of this proposed legislation were emphasised by some, the dominant message remains that the adoption of this text would considerably strengthen the European Union's commitment in favour of equality and fundamental rights as a central aspect of the principles and values of the European social model.
- The concrete operation of the existing legislative framework will only be effective if **all parties** become actively involved in promulgating and applying the rights and obligations imposed by the legislation. As well as equality organisations and civil society bodies specialising in these questions, other bodies, more generalist, must involve themselves further: the social partners, local authorities and the media have a crucial role to play. In particular, the conference showed that local partnerships between the public services, civil society, social partners and business are necessary to enable action at a level that is as close as possible to our fellow citizens.
- It is important to set up concrete tools and **policies to support** current legislation at European level. The Commission's July communication has already identified possible

areas for cooperation between member states. Some of these were discussed in detail at the conference. The participants also welcomed the creation of a European group of governmental experts to provide a special forum in which national authorities can discuss and exchange good practice on non-legislative means of combating discrimination. However, it is clear that these exchanges between governments will only be effective if they are taken up at national, regional and local level by the other stakeholders, failing which the policy of fighting discrimination would remain unheeded: the social partners, businesses, equality bodies, non-governmental organisations.

- The fight against discrimination must not remain a question for specialists or militants; it must be **incorporated into all public policy**. It is important that it be kept in mind continuously and consistently by all actors when drafting policies, analysing their impact and raising awareness at European, national or local level.
- The need to take better account of the subject of **multiple discrimination** was also emphasised. From a legal viewpoint, as current European legislation does not make explicit provision in this area, most member states do not deal with multiple discrimination in their own legislation. When facing a tribunal, the person concerned must too often "choose" an aspect of his or her personality as the grounds for discrimination to win the case, although this only reflects a part of the real discrimination he or she has suffered. An exchange of good practice on this issue at European level is therefore essential.
- Dealing with diversity appears more and more to be a strategic response on the part of businesses to adapt to a society, client base, market and labour force that are themselves more diversified. Setting up **voluntary charters**, signed by companies or local authorities, creating labels identifying firms that have established good practice and extending such instruments gradually across the countries of the European Union are signs of a favourable trend that governments must support. These tools are all effective ways of fighting discrimination in the workplace, where it often remains the most flagrant.
- **The social partners**, as representatives of employees and employers, have an important role in fighting discrimination in the world of work. The unions can inform workers of their rights in this area, support victims of discrimination and help with conflict resolution. Employers have a clear responsibility to respect the principles of non-discrimination, and may see diversity as a new source of dynamism for the business, giving them an interest in exchanging best practice in this area. For all these reasons, the representatives of both employees and employers must be actively involved in the fight against discrimination, and they must be supported in this enterprise by government.

In view of the above, the French Presidency and the Commission encourage European businesses and their representatives to take initiatives likely to promote diversity in the workplace in Europe, and ultimately to draft a European diversity charter, taking account of the results of the call for bids from European companies currently being conducted on behalf of the Commission¹.

They also suggest using the future group of governmental experts at European level to look in greater detail at the two following themes:

- Means of combating multiple discrimination

¹ Call for tenders entitled "Activities promoting and developing the Business case for diversity". The results will be presented at a conference organised by the Commission in Brussels on 11-12 December 2008.

- Incorporating equality issues in public policy (*mainstreaming*)

The Presidency wishes the results of this work to inform the discussions at the next Equality Summit, which will be held under the **Swedish Presidency** in November 2009.