

Minority Issues Forum

Geneva, November 2009-11-18

Effective Minority Participation: Challenges and Opportunities in Ireland and Europe

Intervention by Anastasia Crickley

As Chairperson of the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency and as an Irish woman active on minority issues for many years, it is my honour to contribute to this Forum and congratulate all involved in its organisation.

The European Union and its member states legislative frameworks and directives on discrimination along with the Conventions of the council of Europe as well as the Decisions of the OSCE have all contributed to addressing discrimination and racism which remain significant barriers to minority participation. European Union and member state legislation and initiatives in these fields are strong and cohesive, including in my own country Ireland, where our National Action Plan Against Racism and Know Racism Campaign were effective in their time.

Yet barriers to participation continue to exist in each and every country of Europe. Racism and associated discriminations continue to be the sometimes unrecognised and often unaddressed wall. The European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey conducted by FRA and the most comprehensive survey of its type in Europe invited 23,500 immigrants and minority ethnic group people to respond to key questions regarding discrimination. The results show widespread perceptions of discrimination and racism along with lack of knowledge of or trust in mechanisms and institutions set up to support redress.

In spite of initiatives to foster inclusion there is a clear lack of diversity in the national and European Parliaments not to mention a worrying trend in increased electoral success for anti-immigrant, anti-minority groups.

If we are to create conditions for effective minority participation racism in all its forms needs to continue to be named and addressed in my own country, in the European Union and globally. This means us naming it for what it is, not obfuscating it under new titles or dominant political agendas. Rights denial needs to be addressed as a pre-condition for claiming rights.

In the fight against racism real implementation of the commitments already made regionally and globally by states would go a long way. This requires realistic target setting over an extended period and political leadership rather than only self congratulation for symbolic compliance. Our reports in the EU Fundamental Rights Agency demonstrate again and again the importance of data collection in this regard. Research is not the answer but if the problem is not measured it cannot be managed let alone addressed.

Separate policies and initiatives dividing inclusion and equality, recognition and redistribution do not help either and serve only to ensure that the poorest minority members gain little from them. Terminology needs to be clear. Assimilation is not integration. Combined talk of “integration” of for example, European Muslims some who have been part of the continent for centuries can be more accurately described as discrimination denial. For some groups, the discriminations they experience are not only denied – they are “justified” as if people were responsible for their own oppression. Roma and Travellers, groups consistently identified in FRA’s research as experiencing the most extreme discrimination are frequently treated in this way.

In suggesting that the robust recommendations from this Forum include an explicit mention of racism as a barrier I am also conscious of the need to examine what is meant by participation. Firstly participation “of” may not be the same as participation “for”. To take a parallel case, women have or should have the right to full political participation whether individual women politicians act in the interests of women or not; they themselves on the other hand cannot assume that merely being a woman is enough.

Effective participation will not be achieved by merely removing the barriers and creating conditions for access. Robust analysis and review of the experience of participation and interventions to ensure non-discrimination are essential as well as monitoring of the outcomes for minorities. It is no good getting in if one's contributions are ignored and the sought for outcomes for minorities remain illusory. Positive action, recommended in the EU Directives hold some potential. However, the most concrete outcomes as well as enhanced experiences of participation I have seen for minorities was through the use in Northern Ireland of a positive duty in this regard. I suggest we recommend consideration of such a positive duty, with appropriate monitoring mechanisms to secure effective participation by minorities.

Our consideration of these matters also needs to go well beyond local, national and regional governmental structures to the achievement of effective participation for minorities in all governance structures at every level. Power needs to change hands and the empowerment of women and men to secure this happens, as history demonstrates in a variety of sphere. It also requires different strategies to get beyond gender and class/status hierarchies.

In conclusion, I salute the contributions of those who have had to struggle to participate to a more equal and inclusive world. This incomplete process must continue and gather speed. The economic recession being experienced in many parts of our world far from being a justification of slow down can only be addressed in ways that are for a better world with the full participation of women and men from the minorities who often bear the brunt of its consequences.

Anastasia Crickley, November 2009