

UNFMI Positive steps

We heard this in the introductory remarks that welcoming and respecting diversity in our societies, listening to what local people want – and how they want it, providing services and opportunities for social-economic participation in ways that are tailored in terms of language, culture, religion is the way forward. So how can we achieve this? What makes an effective anti-discrimination law? What makes an effective positive measure?

Providing walk in anti-discrimination points or trained paralegal in rural areas where those who may have experienced discrimination can access to get advice and support is essential. Whether by Roma in Europe or across Eastern Africa, paralegals bring antidiscrimination to the grassroots allowing 1000s of individuals to raise instances of discrimination.

Bodies that monitor anti-discrimination progress are useful when they are effective and independent. Where they don't exist or are not independent or effective, CSOs have usefully set up what are essentially shadow equality monitoring bodies doing the same work for example, the Association Monitoring Equal Rights in Turkey.

Even in countries without specific anti-discrimination legislation, work seeking to achieve social inclusion can be done. In Pakistan, which does not have an anti-discrimination law, it is current common practice for job adverts to appear in the sanitation sector for low wage, low security and low status jobs which state that “only Christians” or “only non-Muslims” should apply. Activists lodged a case in Pakistan's Supreme Court asserting that this practice is direct discrimination and should cease.

Even when new anti-discrimination laws are passed, it can take decades for this to feed into changes in social attitudes and behaviours. Efforts to change “hearts and minds” are therefore extremely important, whether this concerns street theatre against racism, social media campaigns or changes in the curriculum to ensure that respect for diversity is clearly conveyed to all young people.

Positive measures although allowed by international law can be controversial. Majority populations need to understand why they exist. Tackling the disadvantage of those furthest behind really is best for us all in the long term.

Tragically though, such policies are not always either fair or effective. In Pakistan a quota for religious minorities employed in state roles exists but posts often remain unfilled. In Somalia, a formula gives minority communities half of the entitlement of major clans. We heard a heartfelt critique of this, this morning by a Somali Bantu participant at this forum. In this context, offering minority young people work placements is helpful allowing them to break down barriers. This was initiated by international actors and not by the Somali state itself reminding us that minority inclusion is also important in international relief and development efforts.

Mother tongue multilingual education has been proven to be effective in diverse communities, but its application is still patchy. Minority languages can and should be seen as a national opportunity - good for additional language learning and therefore for business links, trade and knowledge sharing between countries. Instead, too often linguistic diversity is seen as a threat to national unity. Tailored provision is also essential to health services: people are unable to act on health advice provided in a language they don't understand. And again, failure to reach everyone, undermines attempts to eradicate diseases like polio and ultimately impacts us all.

At times, when states take a “neutral” approach, minorities can suffer unintended damage as a result of even well meant policies. The roll out of ID cards in Uganda, for example, had a catastrophic impact on the Maragoli community who found themselves suddenly unable to get a job, buy or sell land, obtain a mobile phone because the ID card rollout had inadvertently excluded them. Untailored initiatives applied to diverse populations are never purely technical or “neutral” exercises.

Too few initiatives are assessed for minority inclusion. This can be done at the planning phases or as a post hoc review with participation of minorities. MRG has completed such analyses of loan finance, humanitarian provision, and other programmes revealing in many cases clear biases. This is still all too rare.

Enabling citizens to understand, interrogate, challenge and influence budgets for services at the local level is key. It can lead to new schools, clinics, and other initiatives that meet minority needs. This process can help rebuild trust damaged by years of invisibility and exclusion.

Finally let’s not forget monitoring progress. Too few states systematically collect and publish disaggregated data. Even the SDG indicators have not risen to the challenge set by the UN General Assembly to disaggregate data fully. Minority data is rare but intersectional data, that pays attention to those within minority communities experiencing multiple disadvantages, due to gender, age, disability or SOGI is rarer still. Some states show what can be done (e.g. Brazil) but many remain reluctant for political reasons.

Minorities who are also migrants face specific challenges. More often than not they are banned from working. Ethiopians in Tunisia, Syrian in Denmark, Afghan in Pakistan have socio-economic inclusion rights set aside on the basis of a move across a border. Many minorities fear to approach the authorities because they have experienced discrimination from them in the past, but this effect is far worse for undocumented migrants who are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by employers as a result.

The Special Rapporteur usefully reminded us about the indivisibility of all human rights. If you belong to a religious minority, and colleagues at work have faced blasphemy allegations, will you ask for equal pay or promotion? If you know that CSO leaders arguing for equality are being arrested, will you dialogue with an authority to meet your needs? If you know that you may have to flee your country at short notice, will you invest in building up a business.

My recommendations include

Supporting para legal networks, shadow anti-discrimination monitoring bodies, participatory local budget monitoring, working to change hearts and minds, supporting carefully designed and communicated positive measures including minority tailored support, assessing whether minorities are benefiting from policies and projects, collecting and publishing disaggregated data, support fellowships for young minorities to allow them to gain experience and break through barriers. We can make these recommendations but the critical question is whether the political will exists to make them a reality.

Achieving the social and economic inclusion of minorities is possible. And we know how to do it. It is frustrated primarily by a lack of political willingness to set aside short term expediences, to challenge unfair privilege and to prioritise building cohesive, equitable and inclusive societies where all can blossom and where we all ultimately benefit from peace, stability and sustainable development.