

**EQUALITY SUMMIT: PROMOTING EQUALITY AT THE
LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL**

14 NOVEMBER 2011

EFFECTIVE EQUALITY POLICIES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL.

by Morten Kjærum

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Minister,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In fundamental rights terms, equality means that each individual is able to exercise their rights and enjoy the same level of dignity. Key components are access to education, health, housing and employment.

These are the four keys that unlock human potential and open the door to a better quality of life. And to a large degree, those keys are held by local authorities who are responsible for running our schools and hospitals, and who play a significant role in regulating housing and providing local employment.

In this time of economic crisis, those who are already on the fringes of society risk having the door to social inclusion closed on them. This is in part because the public services that the most vulnerable in our communities depend on are reduced. But we should not fail to recognise that the price of social exclusion is also high. And we should recognise that the consequences of inequality and exclusion have to be faced largely by local authorities: increasing rates of crime, growing social tensions, homelessness, deprived neighbourhoods.

Today I would like to put forward what I see as key elements of an effective equality policy for the local level, based on leadership, inclusion and cooperation at local, national and European levels.

Turning to the first element,

1). Local authorities must take leadership for equality.

- Firstly, by making a clear public commitment to equality. Human rights action plans are not just for national authorities. Local action plans to promote inclusion and combat discrimination send a clear message that authorities are serious about promoting equality. And local action plans can ensure a sustainable and coordinated approach across local services.
- Secondly, they take leadership by adopting internal anti-discrimination measures. This should cover not only public employees but also form part of contractual obligations on private companies involved in public procurement.
- Thirdly, they take leadership by championing diversity through public statements and raising awareness of the benefits of an inclusive society. Here public authorities can draw inspiration from business leaders who understand very well the commercial value of ensuring that their employees are as diverse as the public they serve. Let me quote one employer whom the agency interviewed as part of its research:

“We are seeking to attract and employ the most talented people. It’s a talent-based business case for us. We recognise there are many talented people from all walks of life. We know that there is a direct link between that talent and our balance sheet.”

Turning to my next point,

2). Local authorities must be in a position to measure equality and detect inequality. In order to combat exclusion and inequality, service delivery has to be inclusive. And this means that local authorities need to know if the diversity of their communities is reflected in the diversity of their service users.

How can they do this?

- Firstly, by using locally collected statistics to monitor inclusion. Local authorities hold a great deal of data – school enrolments, visits to hospitals, unemployment figures, numbers of people using social housing. But not all of this is looked at in terms of equality.

Understanding these statistics through the lens of diversity is the first step to promoting inclusion. It is only by knowing who is overrepresented among early school leavers, or unemployment figures, that authorities can understand who they are reaching and who is left at the margins of society.

- Secondly, they can do it by regularly checking the impact of diversity-based policies on these statistics. This can include introducing benchmarks for frontline services, and the use of fundamental rights indicators to analyse progress over time. The Fundamental Rights Agency itself is currently developing such indicators which it would be happy to share with national and local authorities.
- And thirdly, they can do it by setting up local complaints mechanisms, such as a municipal equality office. The agency's research in the area of access to justice highlights the benefits of easily accessible and informal procedures. These allow individuals to enforce their right to equal treatment more quickly and easily than going through the courts, and much closer to home. They also allow local authorities to identify where changes in policy may be needed.

With this I move on to my third point - **cooperation**,

3). When delivering services local authorities work in partnership with other organisations at regional and municipal level. By forging these relations into **local coalitions for equality** they can ensure that their communities experience diversity-based services that are coherent, consistent and mutually supportive. For example:

- Working with schools to combat bullying and prevent early school leaving.
- Working with police to combat hate speech and hate crime.
- Or working with healthcare services, to support community based care for persons with disabilities.

4). And my final point. The agency is currently working with local, regional and national authorities to develop a joined-up approach to fundamental rights implementation. Our work so far underlines that to promote equality many **local governments will benefit from support from the national and the EU levels.**

- Firstly, national and European authorities play an important role in facilitating mutual learning between local authorities. This can be done either by collecting examples of good practice from across the Member States to inspire local practical solutions, or by facilitating direct exchange between local authorities.
- Secondly, equality bodies and national human rights institutions may assist local authorities by providing training to administrators and front-line staff. They also play a role in giving guidance on what equality means when it is applied to specific policy areas under local authority control.
- Thirdly, national and European authorities also need to ensure that European structural funds are directed to promoting equality at the local level. For example, the recent proposal of the European Commission revising the European Social Fund places an obligation on the Member States and the European Commission to promote equal opportunities,

with a focus on accessibility for persons with disabilities. This is a positive step. But could this obligation be broadened to expressly refer to other groups in danger of social exclusion? Could it also be introduced into future revision of the Regional Development Fund?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Promoting equality means capturing diversity: reaching all groups in society with public services; and reflecting all groups in the workforce. To achieve this, local authorities must **exercise leadership** for change, and shape policies around the inequalities that they **measure**. But even if local authorities hold the keys to education, healthcare, housing and employment, they cannot open the doors to equality without pulling **together with other bodies** at the local, national and European levels.

Many thanks for your attention.