

ECRI's seminar with national Specialised Bodies
The role of national Specialised Bodies in supporting local authorities in
the fight against racism and intolerance

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

Local and Regional Authorities (LRAs) are responsible for many public services, including housing, schools, health and social care. They often have substantial legislative power and are responsible for law enforcement at local level. LRAs also provide vital support to local and regional civil society organisations representing different vulnerable groups, and they support the victims of racism and intolerance. Municipalities should be able to counteract discrimination and promote equality, and local employees should serve the whole community, always fully respecting the principle of equality.

The role of national Specialised Bodies¹ (NSBs) is pivotal for the implementation at local level of national policies intended to combat racism and intolerance, as well as for the protection of the rights of individuals belonging to vulnerable groups.

We consider that the NSBs have a particular duty to boost the capacity of local and regional authorities to deal with discrimination and intolerance. It means that NSBs should support LRAs, by providing training for civil servants and NGOs, including in how to gather information on cases involving discrimination or violence, as well as general awareness-raising.

Therefore a critical success factor for achieving a tolerant and inclusive society at local level is an effective cooperation between LRAs, NSBs and NGOs.

Are there co-operation mechanisms in place between NSBs and LRAs?

Promising examples have been identified of partnerships between NSBs and LRAs in countering hate speech and racist and homo/transphobic violence and in facilitating the integration of vulnerable groups. However, these examples are not numerous and do not seem to be the result of specific policies but instead are ad hoc initiatives. More has to be done to mainstream such practices and keep them functioning in the long term.

Are NSBs sufficiently decentralised and accessible at local level? Is their mandate sufficiently clear and are their means adequate for supporting local authorities?

The generalised lack of resources (staff and budget) has a negative impact on the capacity of NSBs to work effectively at the local level. However, in certain countries co-operation with local authorities has enabled NSBs to overcome these constraints and thus be more

¹ Independent authorities expressly entrusted with the fight against racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, intolerance and discrimination on grounds such as ethnic origin, colour, citizenship, religion and language (racial discrimination), at national level.

accessible to victims of discrimination. Support by NSBs to local anti-discrimination bureaus has also encouraged vulnerable groups in reporting discrimination.

Throughout the seminar two key elements were identified for an effective co-operation between NSBs and LRAs:

- it is necessary that local authorities establish networks in order to facilitate contacts and co-operation with NSBs, which have limited outreach capacities;
- at the same time, the specialised bodies' main challenge is to translate abstract human rights principles into a language that can be understood and used by local authorities to combat racism and intolerance in their daily activities.

What is being done, in practical terms, by NSBs and LRAs to prevent and combat hate speech and violence at local level? Are these measures fit for their purpose and capable of affording the necessary protection to victims (actual and potential)?

Hate speech and racist violence threaten social cohesion at the local level. The local and regional presence of NSBs is key in providing the best and widest possible assistance to victims of discrimination and reducing under-reporting. NSBs have also a role in training and raising awareness of local police forces.

Local politicians should fiercely oppose and condemn the use of racist or homo/transphobic political discourse for quick political gain. Moreover, local politicians have a crucial role to play in putting an end to anti-Gypsyism and to hate speech more generally.

Agreements between NSBs and LRAs could be effective in countering and preventing hate speech, in particular anti-Gypsyism and hate speech on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. Moreover LRAs should put in place, with the assistance of NSBs, a system of victim support in cases of discrimination, particularly in the field of employment.

What steps are being taken by LRAs to promote vulnerable groups' integration and respect for the principle of equal treatment in access to employment, housing, education and health care, as well as participation in local political life? What is the added value provided by the NSBs in this?

Specialised bodies must assist local authorities by providing training to both management and staff dealing directly with the public. NSBs also play a role in giving guidance on what equality means when it is applied in practice to specific integration policy areas under local authority control. However, there should be an obligation for LRAs to respect equality: "to discriminate must have a cost".

Empowerment of vulnerable groups is essential to make such groups visible and capable of lobbying for their cause. This can be achieved through co-operation with NGOs. NGOs are therefore key interlocutors for both LRAs and NSBs. Empowerment and integration is also greatly facilitated by political participation and representation. If vulnerable groups vote they count for politicians.

Support to LRAs in collecting equality data, monitoring of equality and the effects of the measures undertaken is also needed to adapt integration policies better to the local needs.

How can international networks contribute to and provide support for co-operation between national Specialised Bodies and local authorities?

International exchange of detailed information about good practices between NSBs and LRAs would help NSBs to have more impact in supporting the implementation of integration policies at the local level. In this sense the examples of good practice provided during the seminar by networks such as Equinet, Rainbow cities and the Alliance of cities and regions

for Roma inclusion, as well by the OSCE/OHIHR and FRA, were very helpful. Such practices can boost co-operation between NSBs and LRAs.

Conclusions

To be most effective and to have a real impact on national policies, monitoring of racism and intolerance (such as that done by ECRI on a country-by-country basis for the past 20 years) should be accompanied by the identification of good practices to guide authorities in preventing and countering racism and intolerance, especially at local level.

It is clear that in the field of co-operation between NSBs and LRAs, more has to be done to exploit synergies in the current context of scarce resources.

Therefore, ECRI proposes to review the existing good practices, assess whether they can be applied also in other local contexts and make sure that they are shared among all those interested.