

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 218 (2006)¹ on effective access to social rights for immigrants: the role of local and regional authorities

1. Discrimination-free access by the whole population to social rights, in particular employment, housing, health and education, is one of the foundations of social cohesion and democracy, and all immigrants, regardless of their status, must enjoy the same conditions of access to these rights as nationals in all member states.

2. For their part, local and regional authorities are being called upon to play an increasing role in the provision of basic social services and should therefore act as guarantors of equal access by all groups to such services and of full respect for the social rights of the whole population.

3. The Congress is nevertheless aware that, despite the efforts made by certain European towns, cities and regions to foster the integration of immigrants and access by them to key social rights, they do not always enjoy equal access to the latter and sometimes even suffer various forms of discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, education and healthcare because of institutional, social, cultural or personal factors.

4. At the same time, there is clearly a major local and regional element in the social integration of immigrants, and local and regional authorities can and must therefore implement policies in these various areas with a view to preventing the social exclusion of immigrants.

5. In particular, the Congress believes that towns, cities and regions really can take steps to facilitate access by immigrants to employment, which is a key vector for integration and opens up access to other basic rights, by co-operating with chambers of commerce, trade unions, employers' federations and training organisations, while also fostering the employment of immigrants in local and regional authorities.

6. Likewise, in view of the responsibilities they often exercise in the field of education, local and regional authorities can not only promote intercultural dialogue in schools but also develop educational tools vital to the more effective integration of immigrants, such as literacy.

7. The Congress also believes that towns, cities and regions have a key role to play in access by immigrants to housing, in particular by ensuring more balanced distribution of the rented housing stock for which they are responsible and by disseminating non-discriminatory principles for the allocation of housing.

8. In this connection, it is also important for local and regional authorities to take account of the difficulties encountered by immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, in access to basic healthcare, given their lack of social protection and adequate resources.

9. The Congress also underlines that any local or regional policies aimed at ensuring access by immigrants to social rights must involve consultation of the groups concerned and draws attention in this connection to its Resolutions 181 (2004) on a pact for the integration and participation of people of immigrant origin in Europe's towns, cities and regions, 153 (2003) on employment and vulnerable groups and 141 (2002) on the participation of foreign residents in local public life: consultative bodies.

10. In the light of the above, the Congress recommends that the towns, cities and regions of Council of Europe member states:

a. establish appropriate, measurable instruments for combating all forms of discrimination on ethnic or racial grounds in the delivery of social services at their level;

b. raise awareness among their citizens of non-discrimination, in particular through information campaigns:

c. develop and boost the capacity of local and regional government staff, municipal police officers and teaching and health staff to work in a context of cultural diversity, taking particular account of the specific cultural features of the various immigrant communities and adopting a gender-based approach;

d. consider assisting immigrants through the employment of mediators from their cultures in the various local and regional government departments and in the hospital system;

e. make sure that learning the language of the host country, while continuing to be a vital requirement for the integration of immigrants, does not become a condition for the renewal of their residence papers;

f. develop, through appropriate measures and on the basis of the situation on the ground, better understanding of the immigrant communities present within their territory and of the actual obstacles these communities encounter in access to social services, if necessary by defining target groups;

g. support, particularly through grants, non-governmental organisations involved in promoting more effective integration of immigrants;

h. foster access by immigrants to low-cost housing and avoid crowding them together in the same neighbourhoods;

i. establish at local and regional level individualised job guidance and counselling services, as well as databases and job marts, while fostering job opportunities for immigrants and helping them overcome the obstacles to their socio-professional integration;

j. ensure access to education, in particular by establishing or expanding after-school tuition centres;

k. ensure, at their level and in accordance with their powers and responsibilities, access by immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, to a minimum level of health care;

l. promote interregional partnerships for integration and bear in mind the best practices and guidelines identified through the Network of European Cities for Local Integration Policy, of which the Congress is a founding member alongside the City of Stuttgart and the European Union's European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions;

m. conclude decentralised co-operation agreements between host towns and towns of origin with a view to promoting intercultural understanding and facilitating the return of immigrants to their home country if they so desire;

n. put in place machinery for consulting immigrant communities and involving them in decisions that affect them, in keeping with the spirit of Congress Resolution 141 (2002).

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 1 June 2006, 3rd sitting (see Document CG (13) 12, draft resolution presented by Muriel Barker (United Kingdom, L, SOC) rapporteur).