

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share this case with you.

Usually, I am not directly involved in handling individual cases, but given the scale and sensitivity of this particular case, I have actively participated at some crucial moments.

At Unia, we received reports of racist incidents within the Brussels emergency service SIAMU, the fire and emergency medical assistance service of Brussels. SIAMU is a service that operates in the challenging context of the Belgian capital region, with people working closely together under difficult circumstances.

With nearly 1,400 staff members, SIAMU is responsible for the safety of more than one million residents, a highly diverse community spread across Brussels and the surrounding municipalities. **This makes combating discrimination within this organization all the more crucial.**

Our role is often that of a **facilitator**, similar to our work with other emergency services like the police. We aim to guide organizations in setting up inclusive procedures and cultures where discrimination has no chance. It is essential that staff can report problems safely and that the organization responds adequately. If the hierarchy fails to do so, it inevitably leads to a culture in which discrimination thrives, normalizing a problematic work environment.

When we received reports about SIAMU **in 2019**, following earlier reports in 2006 and 2017, we began collecting testimonies, which we documented in an internal memo in June 2020.

This memo was not made public but served as the basis for discussions with SIAMU's leadership. I was personally present at some meetings in July and August 2020, and they were very challenging discussions.

Some statements from the hierarchy were shocking, showing a lack of awareness of their responsibilities.

Therefore, the **proposed measures were inadequate** to address the problem.

The reports we received were not isolated incidents but pointed to a deeply rooted problem. Unfortunately, this culture at SIAMU, characterized by systemic racism, xenophobia, and exclusion, is also seen in other emergency services.

Often, a "us versus them" atmosphere is maintained, where diversity is seen as a threat, and there is reluctance to embrace change. Bringing about change requires persistence and a long-term approach—a **true cultural shift**.

In November 2019, we received a report from a recruit whose helmet and locker had been vandalized. '(disclaimer or the offensive language that follows)

Racist and offensive texts, including "Arab" and "Monkey," were written on his helmet, along with a swastika.

Pieces of ham were placed in his locker, clearly intended to insult his religious beliefs. This was just the tip of the iceberg. Within two weeks, we received more than twenty other testimonies from firefighters, confirming that these problems were part of a broader pattern within SIAMU.

The testimonies repeatedly described racism and discrimination. Recruits of foreign descent faced insults during their training, such as being told "you don't belong here," creating a hostile atmosphere where they never felt welcome.

Tasks were also unequally distributed, with recruits of migrant backgrounds more often assigned less valued tasks, such as cleaning vehicles or performing administrative duties, rather than active interventions.

Promotion opportunities were systematically denied to people of migrant backgrounds, even when they clearly met the requirements.

The testimonies also revealed a deep-rooted fear among employees. Many were afraid to speak out, fearing reprisals.

This culture of fear and silence made real change difficult. Racism was not incidental but endemic within SIAMU.

There was constant humiliation of recruits and even physical violence that, in some cases, was ignored or inadequately addressed. This illustrates how the hierarchy often failed to take disciplinary action or commit to change.

We tried to keep the conversation with SIAMU open and sent multiple letters requesting concrete action. Unfortunately, the response was often evasive and minimizing.

Therefore, in June 2020, we compiled a comprehensive summary of the testimonies and presented it to SIAMU's management.

This ultimately led to an audit conducted by Moore Business Consulting, which confirmed our findings and led to recommendations for structural changes.

The audit revealed **troubling details**.

There was a lack of sanctions for discriminatory behavior and an unwillingness to take responsibility. Reports were frequently dismissed as "misunderstandings" or lacking evidence.

The audit clarified that the problem was deeper than isolated incidents—the culture at SIAMU allowed discrimination to flourish, partly due to the lack of sanctions and decisiveness within the hierarchy.

We recommended establishing a reporting procedure, implementing a social media policy, and adopting a code of non-discrimination. We also advised revising selection procedures and introducing quotas for diversity.

The audit also revealed issues with **sexism**. Female employees reported not being taken seriously and facing derogatory remarks.

Their contributions were minimized, and some women felt unsafe performing their work, feeling they constantly had to prove themselves.

We also recommended developing **a diversity plan** with concrete objectives and regular evaluations. This plan should include evaluating progress every six months, both internally by SIAMU and externally by the Brussels government. Continuous **monitoring** is necessary to ensure real impact.

Although our findings and also the audit was presented to the Brussels parliament's internal affairs committee in May 2021, and some measures have since been taken, we still see insufficient progress.

Cultural change is still lacking.

Many recommendations have only been partially implemented or implemented very slowly. Reporting procedures have been introduced, and a new diversity manager has been appointed, but there remains distrust among employees about using these procedures due to a lack of anonymity and a sense of insecurity.

And now?

At the end of 2023, after a recent recruitment wave within SIAMU, we received new reports about recruits of foreign origin failing the internal exam for trivial reasons and a report of reprisals against someone who testified in 2020. External bodies have also received renewed complaints.

We are now internally discussing the next steps.

I believe that the current hierarchy is not willing to prioritize inclusion and diversity. Leadership influences decision-making and the overall culture within the organization. Without leadership striving for change, achieving a real cultural shift is almost impossible.

A change in leadership is needed to make real progress and transform SIAMU into an inclusive organization where every employee feels safe and respected.