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## Fighting discrimination and social exclusion

"Experts from European countries and stakeholder organisations looked into the activities and achievements of Spain's Multi-regional Operational Programme to Combat Discrimination (OPCD) at a Peer Review meeting held in Córdoba in October 2007. Supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) during the 2000-2006 Community funding period, the programme was set up to help sections of the population furthest away from the labour market and most at risk of discrimination. This includes women, single parents and young people, Roma and other ethnic minorities, disabled people, immigrants and returning emigrants, prisoners and ex-prisoners, drug abusers and homeless people. Spain's OPCD is the only ESF-funded Operational Programme dedicated specifically to fighting discrimination. Projects not only target the groups at risk of discrimination themselves - empowering people through training and support, for example - but also carry out awareness raising among employers and the general public. The work of the OPCD will continue through a new multi-regional programme during 2007-2013.

Besides national public bodies, six non-governmental organisations (NGOs) manage the OPCD: ONCE Foundation, Luís Vives Foundation, Cáritas Española, Spanish Red Cross, Secretariado Gitano Foundation and Diagrama Foundation. The meeting offered participants the opportunity of site visits. One group visited the Red Cross centre in Córdoba and saw at first hand how it helps vulnerable people overcome the barriers they face.

### Spanish Red Cross offers practical aid to immigrants

Spain's economy has enjoyed 13 years of uninterrupted growth, reaching 3.8% in 2006. Over the last five years, 50% of that growth has been thanks to immigrant labour. But there is another side to the story, and that is the difficulty that many new immigrants have in integrating and adapting to Spanish society, or in finding suitable work.

Most of those attending the Red Cross centre are women who already have work permits - many from Latin America. But they may have little education or problems getting their qualifications recognised. Often they have to juggle family responsibilities, and because of their ethnic background face discrimination when job seeking. The centre also helps Roma women, offering social skills to those who left school and had children very young, for example.

Women agree on their own personal 'integration pathway'. "They are encouraged to understand that getting better educated is

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important also for their personal lives," social worker Pilar Munoz told the visitors from peer countries ranging from Cyprus to Germany. The pathways aim for a better general quality of life as well as a job. Through courses in literacy, hygiene and health care, hotel and catering work, and information technology, the Red Cross boosts women's confidence so that they are able to help themselves.

"They have set up their own network," pointed out Raquel Garcia, a Red Cross field worker. "That kind of initiative helps to relaunch the social life in an area where social relationships are very fragmented." The women provide support for one another - refining application techniques or going along to job interviews together, for example. "Those who have been in the scheme longer tend to become mentors for others."

After four months at the centre, most of the women are ready for their first interview. After eight months, the majority should be independent, but many still come back from time to time when they need support or guidance.

### Overcoming prejudice

Paloma Azofra is a lawyer, responsible for liaising with local companies to find jobs for women who have polished up their basic skills. "We present ourselves as a professional

service," she explained. "The labour market in Córdoba is quite limited, so we ring the employers to find out what their needs are, and suggest they contact us when they have vacancies.

"In the beginning, we had to work very hard to make ourselves known to firms and overcome prejudices among both employers and the general public," she added. The Red Cross monitors the women once they start work to ensure they are being treated fairly, and would not refer clients to companies who tried to exploit them.

"Immigrants do the jobs that Spanish people don't want to do," confirmed Pilar Munoz. They play a crucial role not only in boosting the Spanish economy, but also reversing the demographic trend towards an ageing population. But as Red Cross worker Susana Gende Feely pointed out, there is a danger that public opinion could become less welcoming if the economy were to go into decline. The Red Cross and other Spanish NGOs taking part in the OPCD are working hard to ensure vulnerable people will not fall prey to discrimination and social exclusion.

Further information on this Peer Review as well as all relevant documents can be found at: [www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/peer-reviews/2007/multi-regional-operative-programme-to-combat-discrimination](http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/peer-reviews/2007/multi-regional-operative-programme-to-combat-discrimination)





## A voice for the excluded

### Ireland's Social Inclusion Forum

Seated around small tables in Dublin's biggest meeting venue, upwards of 250 people from all over Ireland are helping to map out the future of its social inclusion policy. They know what they are talking about. The participants include many NGOs working with the socially excluded, but also people who have direct personal experience of living in poverty. Ireland's annual NAPinclusion Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) has been running for four years now. It is a prime example of something that the EU has been pushing for - citizen participation in the shaping and monitoring of social inclusion policy. In November, expert peer reviewers from across Europe met in Dublin to take a closer look at the SIF and to see if elements of it might be transferable to other Member States. Their meeting coincided with the SIF itself, so they were able to see it at first hand. Among the main lessons that they drew from the experience:

- **Dialogue on social inclusion must be continuous.** The preparation, resources and capacity-building that go into the SIF stimulate a whole chain of smaller events. **The idea of using a national forum to catalyse smaller-scale, more local activities on social inclusion might well be transferable.**
- **Joint ownership of the forum** is important. If government and NGOs are jointly responsible for the invitations to the event, this might help to achieve a productive balance.
- In Ireland, there is strong **recognition of the role of civil society within social dialogue**. This is not the case in all the peer countries. Ireland's official treatment of NGOs as full social partners is unique.
- The **quality of participation** is equally important. **Capacity-building** has an important role to play here - for people experiencing poverty, and their representatives, but also for government officials, social workers and other participants.
- There is a need for participants to receive **feedback on the results of people's participation and on what has been achieved** since the previous SIF.
- **Social inclusion policy is multidimensional.** There is therefore a great need for **coordination, which is sometimes difficult to achieve**. The SIF is unique, but some peer countries have structures with a similar function. Others, though, are still considering how to involve the social actors in the process.
- Strong and high-level **political commitment** is crucial to the SIF process. It is important that high level policymakers participate and that the results of the forum are presented to a group of senior officials.
- **Information, consultation and participation** are crucial to successful social inclusion. The Irish policy is a good example of how to achieve these aims.
- The type of **language** used in events such as the SIF should be close to that of the people taking part. Jargon and long strings of initials should be avoided, as should the temptation to rewrite people's contributions to forums. The Irish practice on this is exemplary: SIF reports preserve contributors' original formulations - often in direct quotes.
- At participatory events like the SIF **practical arrangements are very important**. The peer reviewers particularly appreciated that participants in working groups were seated around round tables with a facilitator being present to lead the debate. This invited equal participation of everyone. Another important consideration is that enough time needs to be available to allow for a real exchange of ideas.
- **Policy impact assessment** is an important part of policy development. The tools used by Ireland to measure that impact merit further examination by peer countries.



- It is important to ensure that NGOs participating in the forum process are **representative** and cover the whole spectrum of social actors.
- **Social inclusion is a long-term process.** It therefore requires a lot of effort, resources and continuous commitment.
- A number of peer countries suggested that **the EU has played an important role in promoting participation of stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion.** In this respect, over the years, substantial progress has been made. However, as was pointed out in the Joint report on social protection and social inclusion 2007, there is scope for further improving the quality of the participation, not least in the implementation and follow up phases. This peer review contributed to further reflection on what quality of participation is. Its results could feed into the preparation of the next round of national action plans on social inclusion 2008-2011 and of the European year 2010 of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

For more information on the Peer Review and to download all relevant documents, please consult: [www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/peer-reviews/2007/the-napinclusion-social-inclusion-forum](http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/peer-reviews/2007/the-napinclusion-social-inclusion-forum)