

Multi-regional Operational Programme to combat discrimination

Panayiotis Yiallourous
Independent Expert

Introduction

Policy against discrimination in Cyprus occupied national policy well before accession to EU (May 2004), especially in the area of gender inequalities with emphasis on combating discrimination against women. The pre-and-post accession period has been characterised by a new impetus under the influence of EU law, policy and processes. Awareness of the problems of discrimination and social exclusion, together with relevant action, have been enhanced by the participation of Cyprus in the Open Method of Co-ordination process and the process of preparing the National Action Plans for Employment, Social Inclusion, Adequate and Sustainable Pensions, and Social Protection and Social Inclusion, as well as the National Reform Programme.

Action against discrimination in Cyprus has many similarities in objectives and target groups with the Spanish OPCD as a consequence of both countries EU membership, although differences in emphasis may exist as a result of the nature and extent of the problems facing each country. The most interesting aspect of the OPCD on the part of Cyprus is the involvement of civil society in the management and implementation of the Programme.

So far NGOs in Cyprus have been mainly involved in the design and preparation of social protection and social inclusion programmes and to a lesser degree in their implementation, with the exception of the area of social welfare services. Unlike Spain, Cyprus has a highly centralized system of administration, with local government still playing a limited role in the provision of social inclusion services. These factors, as well as the size of Cyprus, should always be taken into account, when considering transfer of programmes and practices from countries like Spain.

1. Employment and Social Inclusion

The first National Action Plan for social inclusion 2004-2006, like the Spanish NAPIncl was targeted to the groups of the population who are especially vulnerable to the risk of exclusion, that is

- Older persons;
- Persons with disabilities;
- Single parents;
- Families with serious social or other problems;
- Immigrants;
- People living in rural areas and disadvantaged urban areas.

The strategic objectives of the NAP in 2004-2006 related to

- Facilitating participation in employment;
- Facilitating access to resources, rights, goods and services.

1.1 Access to Employment

The target groups for access to employment were:

- Women;
- Social assistance beneficiaries;
- Older persons;
- The unemployed; and
- Persons with disabilities.

The measures for facilitating access of women to employment include training programmes focused on women, promotion of family support structures flexible forms of employment, strengthening of gender equality mechanisms and activation of NGOs.

Activation of social assistance beneficiaries has been pursued through financial incentives and vocational training programmes.

Though employment of older persons (55-64) has been well above the EU average (53.6% in 2006, EU-27 43.5%), the employment rate for older women is by far lower than that for men (36.6% against 71.6%). The measures that are promoted include encouragement to prolong the working life for those in employment and to encourage integration and reintegration of older women in the labour market.

Unemployment in Cyprus remains at comparatively low levels (5.3% in 2005 and 4.5% in 2006). However, youth unemployment has been the cause of concern (13.9% in 2005 and 10.0% in 2006). Unemployment for women was 1.5 percentage points higher than that for men. The measures that are being taken include vocational training and retraining, improvement of the Public Employment Services (quantitative and qualitative) with the aim of improving their ability to serve special groups and to provide personalized assistance to job-seekers. For the young unemployed the measures include also encouragement of self-employment.

The percentage of persons with disabilities who are in employment is slightly below 50% of those reported as disabled. Special schemes for the promotion of the employment of persons with disabilities provide financial incentives for participation in training programmes and subsidization of employment and self-employment.

The NAPincl 2006-2008 gave emphasis on integrating vulnerable groups into the Labour Market within the target of increasing overall employment to 71% by 2010 (69.6% in 2006). The measures included in the first NAPincl 2004-2006 were further improved and strengthened and targets quantified. In addition the minimum wage, which applies to certain occupations (clerks, shop assistants, child care and nursing aids) with a large share of female participation, is to be used as

one of the tools for encouragement of the employment of women, by raising it to 50% of the median national wage. This is also expected to reduce the gender pay gap.

1.2. Access to resources rights, goods and services.

Poverty for the general population of Cyprus in 2004 was about 16%. However, the risk of poverty for the population aged 65 and over was 51%. Poverty was also higher than average for single-parent families. Measures for reducing the risk of poverty for these groups included improvement of social assistance benefits and selective income support measures for pensioners, single parents, large families and other vulnerable groups.

Preventing social exclusion of children, including those with special needs, is promoted through measures within the public educational system.

Other measures include improving care services for children, the elderly and other dependent family members, as well as health and long-term care.

2. Social Work and NGOs in Cyprus

Cyprus has a long tradition in NGOs participation in the provision of social services, especially of care services. These services are provided in collaboration with the Public Social Welfare Services and in partnership with local authorities. Programmes are subsidized by Government. The number of programmes receiving subsidies increased from 176 in 1995 to 350 in 2006. In addition 17 such programmes will be co-financed by ESF in 2007.

The Supreme co-ordinating body of voluntary action in Cyprus is the Pancyprian Volunteerism Co-ordinative Council. It actively promotes the involvement of the broader society in the design, implementation and monitoring of social inclusion policies and is the channel of a two-way communication between the Government services at the central, regional and local level. The membership of the Council includes 42 national organisations and 270 community volunteerism councils and committees at the local level.

With regard to gender equality, the National Committee for Women's Rights embracing over 50 organisations activated in the area of gender equality, constitutes one of the main partners of the National Machinery for Women's Rights, the body responsible for the implementation of the respective National Action Plan.

3. ESF and Social Inclusion in Cyprus.

The scope of ESF co-financing of employment promotion programmes includes:

- a) Increasing female participation;
- b) Promoting active aging;
- c) Promoting training and employability of young secondary education school graduates;
- d) Building employment pathways for the unemployed;
- e) Increasing flexibility in the labour market;
- f) Further developing of human capital;
- g) Upgrading of skills to labour market needs.

The measures related to access to services include:

- a) Expanding and improving care services for children, the elderly, the disabled and other dependent persons (as already mention 17 new programmes will be co-financed be ESF). This measure serves both the aim of facilitating participation of women in employment and that of preventing social exclusion of the elderly and disabled.
- b) Reducing the possibility of social exclusion for asylum seekers ("social rights for asylum seekers").

4. Comments

Management of programmes for employment promotion, which are co-funded by the ESF under the SPD for Objective 3 is the responsibility of Central Government agencies, whereas programmes financed under the Community Initiative EQUAL are managed by NGOs.

Using the Spanish programme as a model for more involvement of NGOs in programmes management, besides considering the differences in administrative structures and size, would require capacity building and strengthening, support, and effective mechanisms of co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation. In this respect the experience from the involvement of NGOs in the provision of social care services would be useful.

Capacity building for NGOs, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and issues related to combining target approach and mainstreaming approach, should be among the subjects for debate.