



IN FOCUS BRIEF



EQUINET: A NETWORK FOR THE WATCHDOGS OF EQUALITY



Co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship
Programme of the European Union



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INTRODUCTION

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. – Lisbon Treaty, Article 2.

Equality as a core value of the European Union motivates a shared concern for human dignity; the participation by all in economic, social and cultural life; a voice for all groups in decisions that impact on them; and a celebration of diversity. A European Union that values equality, and that gives life to this value, creates societies where all people and social groups flourish.

European equal treatment legislation was created to reflect this core value of equality by ensuring the basic principle of equal treatment, and supporting and protecting people who face discrimination. Member States were required to implement the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC), and the Gender Equal Treatment Directives (2006/54/EC and 2004/113/EC) by establishing or designating an equality body to carry out the competences assigned by this equality legislation. Equality bodies can hear and decide cases of discrimination; provide assistance to victims of discrimination; research, survey and report on discrimination issues; promote good practice for equality; and contribute to an awareness of rights and a societal valuing of equality. Equality bodies are champions for the core EU value of equality and defenders of the right to non-discrimination.

There are no specific guidelines to Member States on how equality bodies should be set up and how they should operate. This has resulted in a wide variety of approaches and practices in the architecture and operation of equality bodies across Europe. European anti-discrimination law requires that equality bodies are set up to cover the grounds of racial and ethnic origin, as well as gender. However, many Member States have gone further in according equality bodies a mandate to deal with other grounds of discrimination as well, including those listed in the Framework Directive (2000/78/EC), and to cover the fields of both employment and service provision in relation to these.



EQUINET THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

The seeds of Equinet as a European Network lie in a pan-European project established and driven by six national equality bodies¹ which initially ran from 2002 to 2004. The project worked to the theme of 'Strengthening the cooperation between specialised equality bodies for the implementation of equal treatment legislation'. The project continued in 2004 with the aim of supporting the uniform application of EU antidiscrimination law and contributing to a levelling up of legal protection for victims of discrimination.

Equinet as a pan-European network was born out of the realisation that a platform enhancing cooperation between national equality bodies was needed and of significant added value. This platform had to have an internal focus of peer support and capacity building for its members, and an external focus of communicating the learning from the work of equality bodies to policy makers and stakeholders. Based on this realisation and thanks to EU funding support, Equinet, European Network of Equality Bodies, was established in 2007.

"Equinet is established to ensure that specialised equality bodies can benefit from each other's experiences and expertise in their constant efforts to improve the enforcement of equal treatment laws, policies and practices and that the equality bodies united in Equinet can make their views heard at European and, where necessary and opportune, national level." - Excerpt from Mission Statement, Strategic Plan 2007-2010

In Equinet's early years, the focus was first and foremost on development: developing the capacity building and peer support opportunities for members; developing the understanding and interpretation of equality concepts used in European and national laws and policies; and developing shared positions on the infrastructure of law, policy and institutions at European and national levels to effectively achieve the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of equality.

"Equinet works to enable equality bodies to achieve and exercise their full potential at Member State level by sustaining and developing a networking between and a platform for equality bodies at European level." – Mission Statement, Strategic Plan 2011-2014

The Strategic Plan 2011-2014 signaled an important step for Equinet marking a time of consolidation and growth of the European Network – a transition from a newly established network to a consolidated and anchored network. During this time, membership grew significantly with a wide spread and diversity of equality bodies. Ensuring that the Network's work was of relevance to the diversity of equality bodies involved has been an important consideration of our work since then. The number and diversity of the staff of member organisations involved in capacity building activities increased steadily. External stakeholders showed increasing interest in Equinet and its work as the Network worked on building a coherent body of knowledge about discrimination and equality by capturing the learning from the work of equality bodies across Europe.

1. The project was run with core EU funding support and in partnership with the Migration Policy Group (a European think tank on migration, integration and antidiscrimination). The original equality body members were: Ombud for Equal Employment Opportunities, Austria (now Ombud for Equal Treatment); Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism, Belgium (now Unia, Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities); Equality Authority, Ireland (now Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission); Equal Treatment Commission, The Netherlands (now Netherlands Institute for Human Rights); Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, UK-Northern Ireland; Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination, Sweden (now Equality Ombudsman)



EQUINET THROUGHOUT THE YEARS (2)

In its 2014 Joint Report to the European Parliament and Council on the application of the Race and Employment Equality Directives, the European Commission called for the “strengthening of the role of national equality bodies as watchdogs for equality that can make a crucial contribution to more effective implementation and application of the Directives. Enhancing the effectiveness of equality bodies and allowing them to reach their full potential could go a long way towards promoting equal treatment.” This reflected the analysis developed by Equinet of the potential of equality bodies and of the pressures that members were coming under in a number of jurisdictions. It formed part of a new priority for Equinet of supporting national equality bodies who were challenged as part of the economic and political changes across Europe.

“Equinet is the European Network of Equality Bodies. The network promotes equality in Europe through supporting and enabling the work of national equality bodies. It supports equality bodies to be independent and effective as valuable catalysts for more equal societies.” – Mission Statement, Strategic Plan 2015-2018

Since 2015, under the guidance of the Strategic Plan (2015-2018), Equinet has emphasised the importance of positioning the network strategically to better contribute to the European equality agenda in the most relevant and timely way and to support a strengthened equality infrastructure at national and European levels. Equinet further prioritised its evolution as a knowledge and communication hub for gathering information on issues of equality and discrimination. We share the expertise, experience and recommendations that draw from the work of national equality bodies to contribute to the development of equality and nondiscrimination policy and law. Recent examples include: consulting members about the implementation of the European Commission pay transparency recommendation; comments on the implementation of the Free Movement Directive and the implementation of the Race and Employment Framework Directives; and commissioned research on sanctions in discrimination cases, on equality duties and on the development of mandates and resources of equality bodies.

KEY DATES

EC awarded the newly established Network a grant under the EC PROGRESS Programme, which supported Equinet work and activities until 2013.

2007

The Network is awarded funding through the EC Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, thus being able to continue its important work in the promotion of equality at European level.

2014

Launch of the European Directory of Equality Bodies, an online directory with detailed profiles of each of our members, as well as comparative sections which look at their mandates, functions and accountability.

2016

Equinet strengthens its focus on gender equality, with the integration of the former network of gender equality bodies, previously coordinated by the EC.

Equinet launches a call for European standards on independence, effectiveness, functions & powers for equality bodies. This is summarised in the Working Paper on Developing Standards for Equality Bodies



KEY DATES

EQUINET MEMBERS

Original project started by 6 equality bodies in 6 countries.

2002

After 5 years, Equinet membership comprised 38 members in 31 countries.

2012

2007

The Equinet Network started with 28 members in 24 countries.

2017

After 10 years, the network has a membership of 46 national equality bodies in 34 countries.

STRENGTHENING NATIONAL EQUALITY BODIES

Since Equinet was set up, the impact of the economic and financial crises and the responses to these have made for a complicated context for the goals and work of equality bodies. While some equality bodies have been positively supported in their work, others have had their effectiveness threatened by significant reductions to their resources. The remits and responsibilities of some bodies have been widened without additional resources being provided. The independence of other bodies has been challenged on the back of political interventions. Some have experienced mergers with other institutions that hold a different remit, which at times has challenged the sustained capacity and impact for the equality mandate. These developments have affected the capacity of some equality bodies to realise their full potential which is ultimately a loss for the societies within which they work, as well as undermining the impact and full implementation of EU laws for the benefit of citizens at national level.

In order to strengthen support for equality bodies and the realization of their potential, in 2016 Equinet released a Working Paper on Developing Standards for Equality Bodies that calls for EU standards on independence, effectiveness, functions & powers for equality bodies. It outlines the parameters that any such standards would need to cover. Equinet has engaged with the European institutions, international institutions and national governments to emphasise the importance of such standards, and get their support for putting them in place at EU level and implementing them at national level.

● “One of Equinet’s main achievements is the development and promotion of a unified system of standards for equality bodies.” Commission for Protection against Discrimination, Bulgaria

SOLIDARITY

Equinet has created a community, a sense of belonging and a source of mutual support for equality bodies. It has given a stronger voice to the work and experience of individual equality bodies scattered around Europe.

● “Equinet brings together so many equality bodies with a widespread scope of missions, grounds of discrimination... The exchange in seminars, conferences etc between all those different backgrounds are extremely fruitful.” Centre for Equal Treatment, Luxembourg



CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

Staff members of equality bodies are supported and enabled to exchange knowledge, good practice and insight into new methods and tools with peers, helping them reach their full potential individually and organizationally at national level.

- “Sharing good practices at Equinet meetings and via online fora has facilitated networking, peer learning and a bilateral good working partnerships, cooperation in cases concerning more than one country.” Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, Hungary

CONTRIBUTION TO THE EU EQUALITY AGENDA

Equinet regularly engages with European policy makers and stakeholders on behalf of its members. Equality bodies' learnings and experiences on the ground are increasingly sought after and recognized by policy makers as a valuable contribution to help assess implementation and further developments of EU equality legislation and policies. Equinet provides the channel to feed this voice and experience into European and international policy and legal developments.

- “Equinet raises the profile and authority of equality bodies at a European level, thus increasing the influence and reputation domestically for such institutions.” Equality and Human Rights Commission, Great Britain

CAPACITY BUILDING

Members benefit from a range of capacity building activities. Regular seminars and training events are regularly requested by and organised for members. Equinet Working Groups have covered strategy development for equality bodies, equality law, policy formation, communication strategies and practices, and gender equality. Time limited initiatives to allow members to focus on a particular task for a short time have also been organised.

- “Equinet has very good networking activities which deal with a wide range of strategic goals. Working groups engagements are particularly appreciated among all members. They offer a very friendly and safe environment.” Public Defender of Rights, Czech Republic
- “Every time I have the privilege of visiting the Equinet team in Brussels, I get familiar with new contents and recommendations I can later translate into the Slovenian context. No matter the forms the latter are taking, be it a novelty or an improvement, I always feel encouraged by the bright new ideas, and even brighter people spreading them. For us Equinet is an indispensable organization that offers infinite amount of knowledge and networking opportunities, but above all it is an organization that inspires great work throughout the whole Europe.” Advocate of the Principle of Equality, Slovenia

KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNICATION HUB

Equinet is a useful resource of relevant information on equality bodies to external audiences, including most recently, through the European Directory of Equality Bodies. It also informs equality bodies on relevant European developments. Equinet generates new knowledge on equality and nondiscrimination through research and reports, based on the work and experiences of our members.

- “Equinet offers members the possibility of information exchange in real time, on discrimination fields (case law, jurisprudence, campaigns, public policies, programmes, statistics, etc.) at both national and European level”. National Council for Combating Discrimination, Romania



- “Equinet offers an exciting variety of activities, a wide range of relevant material and information and a constant update on the developments in the EU and member states.” Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson, Lithuania

SUPPORTING EQUALITY BODIES UNDER PRESSURE

Equinet provides support and takes action at the request of equality bodies if their situation and work are undermined by challenges to their independence or effectiveness. Such action has included addressing national decision-makers in view of specific situations, as well as informing the European Commission of the potential infringement of the EU Directives.

- “At the national level, what I’ve seen is Equinet being immensely important, especially in the recent years where national equality bodies have come under a lot of pressure in their own national context in terms of seeing their resources being reduced, and their capacity being reduced.” Evelyne Paradis, ILGA-Europe

MEMBERS

CHAIRS OF EQUINET EXECUTIVE BOARDS



Chila van der Bas
(2005-2009)

Dutch Equal Treatment Commission (now the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights)



Mandana Zarrehparvar
(2009-2011)

Danish Institute for Human Rights



Jozef de Witte
(2011-2013)

Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (now Unia, Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities)



Evelyne Collins
(2013-2017)

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

EQUINET SECRETARIAT

Anne Gaspard

Executive Director

Yannick Godin

Administration and Finance Officer

**Sarah Cooke
O’Dowd**

Communication Officer

Tamás Kádár

Head of Legal and Policy Team

Katrine Steinfeld

Policy Officer

**Jessica
Machacova**

Membership and Policy Officer

PREVIOUS STAFF MEMBERS

Letizia Bartocci, Nadine Brauns, Catharina Germaine-Sahl, Caroline Nsenda, Cosmin Popa, Ilaria Volpe, Krzysztof Smiszek



EQUINET MEMBERS

Commissioner for the Protection from Discrimination, Albania | Austrian Disability Ombudsman, Austria | Ombud for Equal Treatment, Austria | Unia (Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities), Belgium | Institute for Equality between Women and Men, Belgium | Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman, Bosnia and Herzegovina | Commission for Protection against Discrimination, Bulgaria | Office of the Ombudsman, Croatia | Ombudsperson for Gender Equality, Croatia | Ombudswoman for Persons with Disabilities, Croatia | Office of the Commissioner for Administration and Human Rights (Ombudsman), Cyprus | Public Defender of Rights – Ombudsman, Czech Republic | Board of Equal Treatment, Denmark | Danish Institute for Human Rights, Denmark | Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, Estonia | Ombudsman for Equality, Finland | Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, Finland | Commission for Protection against Discrimination, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) | Defender of Rights, France | Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, Germany | Greek Ombudsman, Greece | Equal Treatment Authority, Hungary | Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, Hungary | Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Ireland | National Office Against Racial Discrimination, Italy | National Equality Councillor, Italy | Office of the Ombudsman, Latvia | Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson, Lithuania | Centre for Equal Treatment, Luxembourg | National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, Malta | Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability, Malta | The Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms (Ombudsman), Montenegro | Netherlands Institute for Human Rights, Netherlands | Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud, Norway | Commissioner for Human Rights, Poland | Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, Portugal | Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment, Portugal | High Commission for Migration, Portugal | National Council for Combating Discrimination, Romania | Commissioner for Protection of Equality, Serbia | National Centre for Human Rights, Slovakia | Advocate of the Principle of Equality, Slovenia | Council for the Elimination of Ethnic or Racial Discrimination, Spain | Equality Ombudsman, Sweden | Equality and Human Rights Commission, UK – Great Britain | Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, UK – Northern Ireland Communication Officer



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