



Original in English

AER 'Social Policy & Public Health' Committee

Declaration

Equal Opportunities for Ethnic Minorities: the Regions' Role

Adopted at the Committee 2 Plenary Session in Terceira, Azores-P (23. October 2007) and at the General Assembly in Udine, FVG-I (8. November 2007)

The Assembly of European Regions (AER) is firmly committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights. The AER believes that diversity in all its forms is a fundamental principle of democracy and a key factor for the sustainable economic development and competitiveness of the regions.

The AER member regions are against any form of discrimination, both direct and indirect, and commit themselves to combating discrimination in all its forms and guaranteeing equal opportunities for all members of their societies.

The AER member regions are convinced that the full integration of ethnic minorities can only be achieved through holistic and comprehensive strategies. We need a combination of initiatives in a variety of policy areas, ranging from employment and social policy to culture and education. Each level of government, be it local, regional, national or European, should take action, within the framework of their competences.

The AER is convinced that policies should address individuals as well as groups within our societies, taking into account the needs and specificities of each member of society. Addressing ethnic minorities as a whole can often be considered as a form of indirect discrimination and may lead to segregation.

In light of the above, the AER member regions promote the following standpoints, which they will pursue in their territories and in cooperation with other regions and all the relevant levels of government:

Political Integration

1. Following democratic principles, ethnic minorities should be encouraged to participate in regional politics. Regional governments and administrations should develop and use equal opportunity strategies, in order to ensure that their staff composition reflects the diversity of their societies.
2. The interests and needs of ethnic minorities should be taken into consideration in all policy areas. The regions will promote the participation of ethnic minorities to the policy-making process, with a special focus on supporting the development of civil society.

Integration and the Media

3. The Regions acknowledge their responsibility to promote diversity as an asset for their societies and to educate and encourage their citizens to embrace and nurture diversity. The AER member regions take a stand in favour of ethnic minorities.
4. Media freedom and pluralism should also be interpreted as a commitment to diversity within the media and presenting a holistic view of society. The regions will act to improve the dialogue with the media, and also put forward regional activities and policy matters on equal opportunities for all.

The Gender Perspective

5. Regions are faced with the statistical reality that women belonging to ethnic minority groups are less integrated into mainstream society, compared to men. It is not acceptable to leave some women at the margins of society, cut off from active social life. The AER member regions emphasize equal opportunities for men and women regardless of ethnic background.
6. The AER has a strong policy on mainstreaming equal opportunities between men and women. The regions therefore support the inclusion of a strong gender perspective within their integration policies.

Integration through Employment

7. Employment is often a gateway to integration. It leads to economic independence, a sense of self-fulfilment and also allows individuals to actively contribute to society.
8. The regions will strive to create diverse employment opportunities and equal access to work, irrespective of ethnic background. In this context, the regions will explore the potential offered by micro-finance schemes, which stimulate the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and can reach persons who are excluded from the mainstream banking and financial systems.
9. Regions are aware that businesses, trade unions and chambers of commerce are useful partners for the achievement of the above goals.

Integration through Education

10. Education has a crucial role in promoting respect and tolerance, overcoming stereotypes and supporting diversity. The regions will ensure that these values are at the core of their education systems and policies. The regions further acknowledge the special importance of having ethnic minorities represented within the education system, thereby ensuring that the educational structure reflects the diversity of society.

Integration starts with young people

11. Regions are convinced that in order to create integrated societies in the future, we need to start today with our young people. Young persons should be exposed to diversity at an early age and all young children should be included in any integrated provision of pre-school nursery education. They should be educated to appreciate the value of diversity. Moreover the regions understand the particular issues encountered by the young members of ethnic minorities. The regions therefore support placing a special focus on young people in all their policies for the integration of ethnic minorities.

Inclusive Housing Policies

12. Creating mixed neighbourhoods is a factor of integration: it limits physical exclusion, exposes people to multiple cultures and fosters understanding. The regions will work with the competent authorities in order to understand the reasons behind the limited success of past initiatives to develop mixed neighbourhoods.

Performance management

13. All the regions represented within the AER should commit to measuring performance of integration and should publicise the progress that has been evidenced through this monitoring.

Recommendations to the European Commission

14. The AER calls upon the European Commission to create a contact point within one of the Directorates Generals (DGs), to deal exclusively with issues relating to ethnic minorities, both national minorities and new arrivals (such as immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers) and to develop programmes that support the development and integration of these groups.
15. The declination of areas, settlements and parts of settlements, the impoverishment of those living there and the territorial concentration of social problems are among the biggest challenges in Europe. An extremely high number of different minorities live in the declined colonies of Europe, mainly immigrants and Romas.
16. The AER supports the initiative of Baranya County to establish, in cooperation with different European and EU organizations, the European Network against Segregation and Social Exclusion, called ENASSE.