

[7] The inclusion of most vulnerable groups in Europe

Fighting discrimination to achieve a more inclusive society is not only a question of respect of what is one of Europe's core values – the equal treatment of individuals, regardless of their religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation – it is also vital for stronger growth, higher employment and greater social cohesion in the EU.

■ Why combating discriminations?

A number of groups within our societies face higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to the general population. These vulnerable and marginalised groups include but are not limited to: people with disabilities, immigrants and ethnic minorities (in particular the Roma), homeless people, ex-prisoners, drug addicts, people with alcohol problems, isolated older people and children.

The problems these groups experience are translated into homelessness, unemployment, low education, and subsequently, their further exclusion from society.

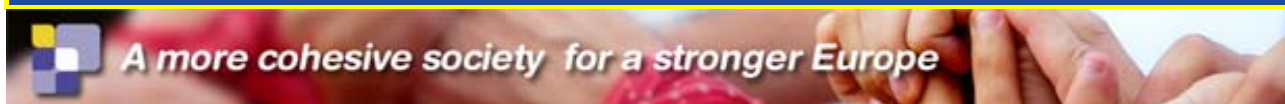
Inclusion of vulnerable groups is one of the priorities of the European Social Protection Social Inclusion Process. In this context, Member States have committed to develop integrated and coordinated responses to the multiple disadvantages and the need of particular groups.

■ A European commitment

The European Union has a three-fold approach to overcoming discrimination and increasing the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups – increasing access to mainstream services and opportunities, enforcing legislation to overcome discrimination and, where necessary, developing targeted approaches to respond to the specific needs of each group.

Ethnic minorities and immigrants are identified as disadvantaged in almost every Member States. Not only do they face greater difficulties to access social services such as employment services, health care services, schools, financial services and housing services, they also tend to be stigmatised. The European Union promotes increasing the labour market participation of immigrants and ethnic minorities (in particular the Roma), to the same level as the majority population, and their participation in social, cultural and political life. The precarious situation of Roma should be tackled accordingly in all countries where they reside.

Disabled people also face higher risk of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. The European Union urges Member States towards narrowing the gap in the employment rates between disabled and non-disabled people through the implementation of active employment measure.



Measures must be also implemented in favour of areas marked by exclusion – combating regional inequalities, tackling disadvantages faced by rural areas, and helping regenerate deprived areas and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Eliminating the barriers to education and training for all vulnerable groups and at all levels is a key issue.

■ The 2007 European Year of Equal Opportunities for All

Since July 2003, the EU has been running the *For Diversity, Against Discrimination* campaign. The campaign is due to wind up at the end of 2007. It focuses primarily on raising the awareness of employers and young people on the existence of anti-discrimination legislation. It also aims at communicating a positive message on diversity, particularly as regards the labour market and the business case for diversity.

The *2007 European Year of Equal Opportunities for All* builds on and complements this information campaign, which is funded by the European Commission as part of the Community Action Programme to combat discrimination. It puts a stronger focus on the promotion of diversity and of equal opportunities for all, as well as on issues such as multiple discrimination, representation, that are closely linked to the wider issue of equal opportunities.

■ Anti-discrimination initiatives in the Community Action Programme and PROGRESS

Through its two funding instruments – the Community Action Programme to combat poverty and social exclusion and PROGRESS – the European Commission plays a key role in the promotion of best practice in the field of social inclusion.

Firstly, some studies have considerably contributed to improve our collective understanding of social exclusion. These studies addressed issues such as the poverty and social exclusion of lone-parent households, disadvantaged youth, immigrants and Roma.

Secondly, mutual learning and exchange of best practice has been facilitated through the organisation of Peer Review meetings, where innovative approaches to the integration of ethnic minorities and migrants have been presented and discussed. Likewise, Transnational Exchange Projects have also greatly contributed to give a European perspective to problems which were so far mainly tackled at national level.

Thirdly, awareness has been raised on a number of key issues such as handicap through regional campaigns.

Fourthly, the capacity of actors to address social exclusion and discriminations effectively and to promote innovative approaches has been strengthened, through a direct and project related financial support to organisations such as the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), Caritas, Eurodiaconia, PICUM, Retis and FEANTSA.

■ The EU Social Protection Social Inclusion Process

Through the EU Social Protection and Social Inclusion Process, the European Union coordinates and encourages Member State actions to combat poverty and social exclusion, and to reform their social protection systems on the basis of policy exchanges and mutual learning. As such, it underpins the achievement of the Union's strategic goal of sustained economic growth, more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion by 2010.