

The Council of Europe and diversity
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Introduction

Protecting and encouraging all forms of diversity among its member states has always been seen as by the Council of Europe as a major means of defending our Organisation's core values of human rights, democracy and the Rule of Law. The Council has consistently shown the world the way forward towards the fullest possible expression of cultural, racial and social diversity, especially in the years following the arrival of Europe's new democracies after 1989.

Currently, the Council's tools for the protection of diversity include, for example, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, created after the Vienna Summit of Heads of State and Government in 1993 with the task of combating racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance in the greater Europe. ECRI's action covers all necessary measures to combat violence, discrimination and prejudice faced by persons or groups of persons, notably on grounds of "race", colour, language, religion, nationality and national or ethnic origin and is based on country-by-country monitoring and thematic studies. The Council also has a Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and a Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, a Parliamentary Committee for Equality, an Equality section in the Directorate of Human Rights, as well as many programmes concerning education, to name just some of the more prominent examples.

Two of our ongoing campaigns, the second "All Different, All Equal" Youth campaign and the "Dosta" campaign to combat discrimination against the Roma populations in Europe, show the active commitment of the Council of Europe to nurturing diversity in a difficult international climate, where terrorism and conflict create mistrust and degrees of intolerance with respect to religious and racial differences. The fact that membership includes such a large number of member states, 47 in all, makes our Organisation diverse in its very nature, and extends the scope of its action to the widest possible European area.

But is the Council of Europe such a model of diversity as outward appearances suggest?

In this overview, I will present existing structures and mechanisms set up to ensure that diversity is protected and enhanced and its value exploited within the Council of Europe, and in doing so, I will outline the types of problem encountered in introducing and sustaining these policies.

How staff sees and reflects diversity

So we in the Secretariat have our feet firmly planted in the fertile soil of the Council of Europe's conventional *acquis* and activities in many areas of diversity. Many of us participate professionally in the diversity-enhancing activities I have referred to. This familiarity with the issues at stake probably raises the expectations of staff as a whole with regard to the level of respect for diversity we consider necessary for our own working environment. At all events, the declared objectives of the Organisation are subjected by staff to regular comparison with in-house practises, often put in an unfavourable light in this context. It is common to hear colleagues and fellow staff representatives express regret that "the Council doesn't practise what it preaches" or that "words are not translated into deeds" when referring to benchmarks for diversity set by the Council of Europe for European societies.

When one arrives at the seat of Council of Europe in Strasbourg and looks around, or when one observes staff gathered for meetings, two things are obvious to the naked eye. The first is that the population of the Secretariat does not *appear* extremely "diverse" and the second is that this diversity is rarely "flaunted" by staff as an added value to be proud of. For one thing we are a very "white" organisation, which is of course quite normal for an institution bringing together European member states, but does not necessarily reflect the variety of ethnic origins present in the individual member states themselves (there are very few French citizens of North African origin, for example). National quotas for recruitment ensure a fair spread of nationalities, but not a variety of cultures or origins within these nationalities. On another level, it is apparently difficult to establish figures for the number of disabled people employed in the house, due mainly to problems with the definition of disability, but it would seem that the percentage is low compared to targets set in many member states. There is also a very high degree of similarity in aspects like dress codes, and a rather conservative atmosphere that places value on conformity rather than on difference. To take another example, calendars and schedules are still very much geared to Christian holidays and key dates.

A study carried out among Council of Europe staff in 2004 in the form of a "Diversity Climate Questionnaire" and the analysis of its results in a "Diversity Audit report", conducted by occupational psychologists Pearn Kandola, came up with some very interesting and rather alarming information about the Council's makeup and particularly about the staff's impressions of the degree of equality and equal opportunities achieved. A stunning 70% of the staff responding to the questionnaire disagreed with the statement that "Everyone in the Organisation has fair and equal access to career development opportunities."

The diversity audit concluded that a "champion" for diversity was needed, and suggested that the Deputy Secretary General could fill that role. Since then, our present Deputy Secretary General, Maud de Boer Buquicchio has indeed devoted efforts to encouraging diversity and equality with some success. She is chair of the Equal Opportunities Board of which I will speak later, and she launched an initiative to bring together high-level women managers with the aim of developing mentoring. This particular project has not made much progress.

Diversity in the regulations

In May 2006 the Committee of Ministers adopted Resolution (2006)4 revising Articles 3 and 13 of the Staff Regulations, respectively governing non-discrimination and non-discrimination between candidates. This revision now ensures, on paper at least, equal treatment for staff and prospective staff, without direct or indirect discrimination on grounds of racial, ethnic or social origin, colour, nationality, disability, age, marital or parental status, sex or sexual orientation, and political, philosophical or religious opinions. It also allows the Secretary General, in the context of a predetermined policy, to take measures of positive discrimination aimed to "promote full and effective equality and equal opportunities for everyone, provided that there is an objective and reasonable justification for those measures."

The revision is certainly a mark of progress in the recognition of diversity, especially in areas hitherto insufficiently taken into account such as age and sexual orientation. Thus, for example, age-limits for recruitment have been lifted, except for very specific cases such as youth advisors. The possibility of positive discrimination allows efforts to be made to adjust different types of under-representativity, such as encouraging people with disabilities to have

access to jobs and to adequate working conditions. Provision for encouraging gender equality has been made in vacancy notices for some years now.¹

Unfortunately, the Committee of Ministers has not advanced as far as staff, including Human Resources and Administration, would have wished. Texts discussed between staff representatives, Human Resources and Administration to modify the Staff Regulations in order to secure the recognition of stable heterosexual or same-sex partnerships instead of only married heterosexual couples have so far met with point-blank refusal on the part of the Ministers' Deputies. This results in flagrant discrimination against these partnerships especially in questions of transfer of pension and insurance rights, and in all benefits linked to the notion of "head of household".

This situation puts the Council of Europe behind some of its member states in implementing equality, and is mainly the result of a lack of consensus regarding the definition of how far diversity should be taken into account, due to cultural and religious differences. A secondary reason for the blockage is that the Committee of Ministers fears footing the bill of this recognition, which would extend benefits to more staff members. As a result, the staff can only regret that in countries like Spain, strong political leadership has allowed same-sex partners to achieve equality, whereas the opposition of certain member states hinders this progress in the Council.

Human resources and diversity

Most of the groundwork to promote diversity in Council of Europe practices and the materials produced to raise awareness are the responsibility of the Directorate of Human Resources. In March 2004 an Equal Opportunities and gender mainstreaming policy was adopted, defining equal opportunities, gender mainstreaming, identifying direct and indirect discrimination and measures to ensure equal opportunities.

- The Equal Opportunities Board

The Equal Opportunities Board was also established in March 2004. It is chaired by the Deputy Secretary General and composed of 7 members, of whom 3 Staff Committee members and the Equal Opportunities Officer. Its role is to advise and monitor equal opportunities policy within the Secretariat, for which it drafts annual work plans and annual reports. I have brought some copies of the 2006 report with me, as although I think the filter used for the photos inside would sometimes have been more appropriately tinted with a rosy colour rather than green, it gives a lot of insight into activities and aims.

- The Equal Opportunities Unit and the Equal Opportunities Officer

This is a small unit within the Human Resources Development and Career Management Division, composed of two staff members one of whom is the Equality Officer. It implements the Board's work programme and contributes to the preparation of policies. The Equal Opportunities Officer is a member of the Appointments and Appraisal Boards, and participates in some recruitment and promotion panels to ensure equality.

¹ "Under its equal opportunities policy, the Council of Europe is aiming to achieve parity in the number of women and men employed in each category and grade. In the event of equal merit, preference will therefore be given to the applicant belonging to the under-represented sex (male candidates in the present case).

The Council of Europe welcomes applications from all suitably qualified candidates are welcome, irrespective of gender, disability, marital or parental status, racial, ethnic or social origin, colour, religion, belief or sexual orientation."

- *Recruitment and promotion*

As well as removing age conditions from vacancy notices, candidates are no longer listed in order of seniority. On the new electronic application form, information such as state of health or marital status is not requested. Some progress has been made recently in the access of women to higher management levels, as now the A4 grade counts over 40% of women. However, the proportion of women at A5/A6/A7 levels has remained stable at around 20, 30 and 10% respectively.

- *Intercultural management training*

Several training sessions have been organised on the experience and practice of diversity and intercultural management. A programme on Management and Leadership Development was launched in the Council in 2006 and also addresses these questions. In recruitment and promotion panels there are more and more often questions on managing cultural diversity, which give a new angle to the classic questions on team work and conflicts in the workplace.

Awareness-raising activities

International "visibility" days regularly provide occasions for promoting diversity within the Council of Europe.

- International Women's Day on 8 March is an opportunity to explore questions of diversity linked to equality between, women and men. In 2005, the theme of the day was the "glass ceiling" hindering women's access to high-level management. Discussions were based on a study carried out on both the facts showing the uneven distribution of women and men in the Council's Establishment Table, and on the existing psychological, cultural and social barriers to equality between the sexes in high-level management positions.
- International Day of Disabled Persons on 3 December. Awareness-raising activities are carried out in the Council - in 2006 a blindfold lunch was held for staff, and associations for and with the disabled visit the Council to explain their activities and explain the issues of the employment of people with disabilities. An internal guide for the successful integration of disabled persons was published in 2005 and again in 2006.

The role of staff representatives

Ownership and multiplication

The Staff Committee and trade unions have a major role to play in contributing their ideas to these projects, and especially helping to make them accessible to colleagues. Being staff representatives, we have greater awareness of policies, programmes and activities, and as long as we can feel ownership of them we are more than ready to guide staff towards the training and development possibilities offered.

Staff representatives: a force for proposals

Staff representatives are also a major force for new proposals in the Organisation. We are not always heard, of course, but in some instances we can be agents of progress – our work on recognition of "minorities" like non-EU staff has had lasting effects, and we are now turning our attention to questions such as how single staff members' rights are protected

Negotiation and joint instances

Most of our participation in joint groups with Administration is limited to consultation, so our comments can be taken up or left out by our interlocutors, often leading to disappointment and frustration and worse, to policies with which we do not agree. However, promoting diversity through ensuring equality is perhaps one of the more positive areas of our collaboration. For example, a pilot negotiation group was set up a couple of years ago to work on reconciling private and professional life (including parental leave, part-time work, teleworking). The results of this group were instructive and did lead to progress on part-time work, for example. We are now seeking to renew the experience, having learnt some of the lessons of how the principle of “give and take” can be best exploited in the interests of staff.

"Reminders and alerts - "pressure from below"

Active and interactive participation in recruitment panels, opposition to unfavourable executive decisions published on our intranet site and denunciation of slow action on the part of the decision-makers to implement and promote diversity is a large part of the work of staff representatives. From individual cases of discrimination to general problems, especially those that require logistics, such as access for the disabled to meeting rooms and facilities, we try to monitor on a day-to-day basis problems that may occur on the spot or in our external offices.

The role of associations

What better forum for demonstrating the value of our staff's diversity than through the social activities that can give depth to the bare bones of our working relations? In this spirit, different sections of the Staff Association exploit the wealth of different cultures, personalities and social groups through regular events and awareness-raising activities that are an essential tool in making a place for everyone in our Organisation. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual Group organises meetings, activities and participation in events held in Strasbourg, the Amicale Femmes organises trips, charity days and courses amongst others (it is now open to membership by men but has chosen to keep its name!). There are also knowledge-sharing activities (like sign languages, Arabic language courses, etc.) and there has been a series of country-specific social events called “getting to know the member states”.

Conclusion

In June and November 2000, the Council of the European Union adopted Directive 2000/43 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin and Directive 2000/78 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation. These are in the process of integration into national legislation but some slow implementation has resulted in warning being addressed to over half of the member states in June this year. Nevertheless, they place obligations on national labour legislation and practices that ensure progress. In addition, the European Union has declared 2007 European Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

One of the support documents for the year is an extensive survey published in 2005 of 800 European companies, which makes interesting reading and for me confirms suspicions that the private sector is overtaking our organisations in taking diversity into account. This is mainly because some of the driving factors that are now making integrating diversity a condition for success in private industry are less self-evident international organisations. The main reasons for implementing diversity policies given by the companies that responded to the EU study were the need to recruit and retain a high-quality workforce in countries where population decline is reducing national employment pools, to improve corporate image and reputation, and to encourage greater innovation and enhanced marketing opportunities.

In this context, the Council of Europe, as in many areas, has played a pioneering role in defining and defending all forms of diversity in our member states and continues to pursue activities promoting diversity. However, in the current critical financial situation, these areas of the Council's activity are under serious threat, as member states are calling for more focus on core activities directly concerned with upholding human rights, the Rule of Law and democracy. Currently, two major issues make the Committee of Ministers reluctant to take adopt positive measures to promote diversity either inside or outside the Council. Any initiatives with an immediate cost, even if the medium-term benefits can be argued, are hard or even impossible to introduce; secondly, member states are hesitant to confront their different religious or cultural traditions differing concepts of diversity in a rather sensitive climate (diversity of sexual orientation or religion).

On the part of staff, although diversity practices and awareness among serving staff are quite high, and despite the projects and programmes I have described, in my opinion recruitment and promotion do not yet give sufficient weighting to aspects of diversity, whether related to sex, race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, sexual orientation or even competencies. Progress is ongoing, but practices still do not respond adequately to the expectations of staff, as was evident from the results of the 2004 Diversity Climate Questionnaire. In particular, lack of financial and staffing means make policies difficult to adopt and implement. The future of our Organisation appears uncertain at the present time, but it would be a shame both to lose what has been done to enhance diversity in all its forms throughout Europe, and it would be a shame if a lack of financial and human resources within the Council of Europe were to stop the impetus gained over the last few years that has helped us this far towards taking diversity fully into account.