

# “EQUALISING THE WORKPLACE – DIVERSITY IN ACTION” EXCHANGE EVENT

Belfast, Northern Ireland, 13 June 2007

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EQUAL Development Partnerships that have been working on the themes of diversity and empowerment in 20 different Member States came together at the EQUALising the Workplace Exchange Event, in Belfast, on 13 June 2007. They were joined by representatives of Managing Authorities and National Support Structures and together the 120 delegates developed the messages to be presented to a subsequent Policy Forum. This Forum will be held in the same city, at the end of 2007 and it will attempt to engage the interest of policy makers in taking forward those good practices related to diversity and empowerment that are emerging from EQUAL. Three themes were considered during the EQUALising the Workplace event and the main conclusions are outlined below.

### The Empowerment of Vulnerable Groups

The importance of meaningful involvement was stressed under the slogan “Nothing for us without us” or, in other words, “Don’t do it for us, do it with us.” This pointed up the fact that **it is not enough to involve advocacy organisations or agencies that claim to represent the interests of particular target groups. The end users have to be involved in discussions on issues that have a direct impact on their lives.** For this involvement to be meaningful the end users must be briefed to take part in debates with decision makers and those who are in positions of power must be prepared to acknowledge the experience, aspirations and needs of these users. EQUAL DPs were able to describe a number of cases where **by taking the opinions and insights of beneficiaries seriously, considerable improvements had been made to the formulation and development of policies relating to their social and vocational integration.**

### Working with Employers

Emphasis was placed on the need to address employers in jargon-free language that they can understand. **Initial contact with employers is often most effective when it is based on a two pronged approach that combines raising employers’ awareness of the need to comply with the provisions of employment and equality legislation together with an attempt to convince them of the benefits of diversity.** Employing people from disadvantaged groupings can appeal to employers’ sense of corporate social responsibility, especially when they realise that it could result in an improved image and customer base for their enterprises. However, more efforts are required to disseminate studies showing positive business returns from such social responsibility policies and also in building diversity into HR Management training. It was agreed that **significant advances could be made through the introduction of diversity, as a requirement in public procurement tendering processes.**

### Building the Bridges

It was clear that empowerment must always be approached from both the individual and the environmental perspectives and, in the latter instance, “environmental” relates to the practices of integration agencies. These **agencies should listen to the customer’s viewpoint and should increase his or her capacity to make choices and to transform those choices into action.** Quality standards for the operation of these agencies such as EFQM would not, in their own right, guarantee an empowering environment and it was necessary to embed empowerment within the quality principles of the agency. A plea was made that **cooperative working should be promoted and that this should result in committed integrated partnerships that involve all the key players including the beneficiaries.** It was suggested that the term **shareholders** rather than stake holders should be used, in this respect, to describe the members of such partnerships, as it tends to suggest that all have an equal involvement.

**Another important result of the Exchange Event is that the informal interaction between participants has led to the emergence of a network on empowerment and inclusion. Ways of supporting this network will be explored in the lead up to the Policy Forum.**