

# “DIVERSIFYING THE WORKPLACE: STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSION” POLICY FORUM

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND, 29-30 NOVEMBER 2007

## THE MAIN OUTCOMES AT A GLANCE

The main recommendations to emerge from this Policy Forum were as follows.

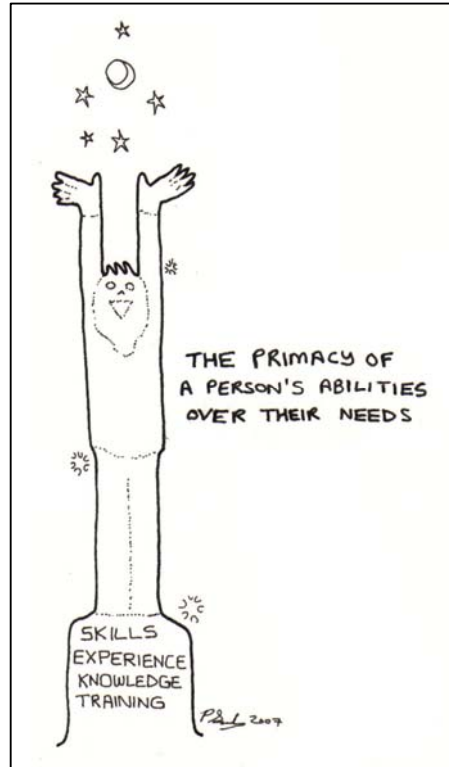
1. **The principle of ‘Nothing about Us without Us’ should be a required feature of all publicly-funded activity – and should be seen as a key determinant of value for money.**

The main legacy of EQUAL is seen to be the affirmation of the primacy of people’s abilities over their needs. Where it has been most successful, it has shown how it is possible to move from advocacy and acceptance of individual rights, to good learning and employment practices through which people are trained to develop their individual talents and abilities, and then are employed to exploit them. (See page 30 - Closing Plenary Section)

2. **Listening to disadvantaged people and recognising them as “Experts through Experience” should become the basis for future schemes and projects.**

EQUAL has created a great deal of inter-agency working, including partnerships and networks activities that have brought the voice and the lived experience of disadvantaged people into the schemes and activities that involve them. These structures that have actively and directly involved such “Experts through Experience” must not be lost after EQUAL and should be used as examples of good practice in the future. (See page 31 - Closing Plenary Section)

3. **The learning from EQUAL’s employer engagement should be captured and sustained through the sharing of these positive experiences.**



In EQUAL, employers have had the opportunity to test new ways of promoting diversity such as establishing alternative recruitment strategies, guaranteed job interview schemes, work placement and mentoring programmes, new tailored training courses and employers’ networks. These positive experiences have stimulated a change in employers’ attitudes and mindsets about diverse groups and also a change their behaviour in relation to how they recruit and retain employees, in general. In addition, it should be noted that public authorities and public agencies are also employers and, in many cases, they have a lead function in demonstrating positive recruitment and employment practices to private employers. (See page 31 -Closing Plenary Section)

**4. There should be more guidance about, and research into, the business case for diversity and its applications.**

Whilst legislation may be helpful in the recruitment of people from diverse backgrounds, particularly in Member States with less comprehensive equality frameworks, the desired cultural change throughout Europe requires persuasion and commitment and not merely compulsion. The business case is an important factor in the promotion of diversity but it may not always be possible to demonstrate the benefits of diversity by using economic criteria alone. However, EQUAL has shown that employers will engage in the creation of opportunities for disadvantaged, if such cooperation is clearly focussed on approaches to reconciling business objectives with social responsibility. (See page 31 - Closing Plenary Section)

**5. There should be genuine engagement of official agencies and policy makers with project beneficiaries and also practitioners. Such consultations should treat beneficiaries as equal partners within a partnership of shareholders and “consult and ignore” scenarios should be avoided by providing feedback to beneficiaries - thus ensuring accountability.**

EQUAL experience has shown how the conscious involvement of beneficiaries, as Experts through Experience, in the planning, delivery and evaluation of programmes has had a significantly positive impact on the quality and appropriateness of the interventions. Such consultation also obtains a degree of commitment and ownership from beneficiaries that could not otherwise be achieved. (See page 32 - Closing Plenary Section)

**6. Support should be provided, through capacity building and the establishing of formal arrangements for consultations, at local regional and national levels to enable beneficiaries to influence policy-makers.**

EQUAL has demonstrated that if beneficiary groups are to influence policy, they need assistance in preparing and presenting their case and communicating evidence-based successes and benefits in support of that case. (See page 32 - Closing Plenary Section)

**7. Training or the type of experiential learning that has been developed in EQUAL should be provided for members of staff in the public and the voluntary sectors in order to stimulate a greater urgency in making the cultural changes that would result in a more direct and active involvement of either their clients or those groupings that they claim to represent.**



Two types of bodies have a major role to play in ensuring that beneficiaries are appropriately involved and consulted. These are the public authorities that are the main service providers and the voluntary or representative organisations that are in closest contact with the beneficiaries but both need to change their thinking and their practices. (See page 32 - Closing Plenary Section)

**8. The concepts of empowerment and diversity should be developed within the 2007 – 2013 ESF Operational Programmes and within the wider framework of national and EU social inclusion, anti-discrimination and employment policies.**

Whilst some of the principles and approaches of EQUAL have been incorporated into the new ESF Regulations and into national and regional Operational Programmes, initiatives must be taken to advance all of its achievements to continue the validation and mainstreaming of models of best practice. (See page 33 - Closing Plenary Section)

**9. Provision should be made for the appropriate monitoring and evaluation of the accountability of ESF and other European or national programmes to their beneficiaries and for the recording of examples of good practice in terms of beneficiary involvement and empowerment.**

European programmes like EQUAL can have significant innovative and catalytic effects, particularly at local and regional levels where they can stimulate the introduction of new structures and practices. (See page 33 - Closing Plenary Section)

At its meeting, in Paris, on 4 February 2008, the European Steering Group for this Mainstreaming Programme considered a draft of the report on the Policy Forum and, in particular, it agreed the above recommendations. The Steering Group also decided to work with the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities to establish another platform within the 2007 to 2013 European Social Fund Programming Period, as suggested during the final Plenary Session of the Policy Forum. The objectives of this platform will be to pursue the above recommendations and to incorporate EQUAL's best practices in terms of diversity and empowerment into the implementation of ESF Operational Programmes and national and EU employment, inclusion and anti-discrimination programmes. The ultimate aim will be to create a stable and real link between people and projects on the ground and policy issues at EU and national level. This could prove a very important instrument in bringing sustainable change to national and European actions to combat labour market inequalities.

*The Steering Group would like to recommend the format of this Policy Forum to the European Commission as an example of good practice for the management of future events. In their experience, which goes back to the start of the Community Initiatives in 1992, few other formats have been as successful in presenting and showcasing the experiences of beneficiaries of ESF funded activity.*