



## **European Integration Forum**

### **Summary report of the first meeting**

### **20-21 April 2009**

The inaugural meeting of the European Integration Forum took place on 20-21 April 2009. More than fifty civil society organisations attended alongside representatives of the European Commission, of the European Economic and Social Committee, of the Committee of the Regions, of the Fundamental Rights Agency, of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and of the Network of National Contact Points on Integration.

#### **Opening plenary session**

The meeting was opened by Mr Jacques Barrot, Vice-President of the European Commission, responsible for Justice, Freedom and Security, Mr Mario Sepi, President of the European Economic and Social Committee and by Mr Tomas Haisman, Director of the Department of asylum and migration policies at the Czech Ministry of the Interior. Opening speeches underlined that **civil society organisations play a leading role** in encouraging coherence in integration policies and the **Forum should give voice** to their expectations and proposals.

It was also pointed out that **political will** was very much needed to address the major issues that the EU is currently facing. This political will to tackle actively immigration

and integration had been formalised in the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum, adopted by the European Council in October 2008. Now it was time for **political ambitions to be translated into actions**: the European Integration Forum together with the European Web Site on Integration would help the EU meeting this objective.

It was also recalled that integration is a **dynamic two-way process** of mutual accommodation, based on the rights and duties of both immigrants and the rest of the population. Integration therefore consists in **creating equal opportunities** for all, guaranteeing equal treatment and achieving a feeling of common belonging. The **EU encourages intercultural dialogue** and **acts in favour of integration** by establishing a clear political framework, involving all the levels of power – from the local to the European level – and providing funds. This approach helps to release the wealth created by the meeting of different peoples and cultures and to reduce fear and misunderstanding.

Opening speeches also stressed that on the one hand civil society and in particular NGOs were key players capable of facilitating integration. On the other hand, nevertheless, this process required the **participation of immigrants themselves**: their presence was crucial for the understanding their requests and expectations and had to be encouraged. As no dialogue platform on integration had previously been set up on a European scale there was **no ready-made formula on how the European Integration Forum should work** and it was **for the participants to shape it actively**.

### **Integration – a EU approach**

With the launch of the European Integration Forum the European framework for integration proposed by the European Commission in 2005 in its "**Common Agenda for integration**" **has been completed**. The EU is therefore at a turning point and the Forum comes to life at a very topical moment.

Civil society organisations pointed out that the European Integration Forum is particularly needed in order to **link local and EU actors** and to **overcome the lack of involvement in the European debate of immigrant organisations and organisations representing immigrants' interests**. The Forum is therefore an opportunity to make

the voice of civil society heard and to give additional impetus to the EU Common Basic Principles on Integration by **developing recommendations, raising awareness** of best practices from civil society and **fostering interaction** between stakeholders. Its work should also contribute to **policy coherence between the areas of integration, anti-discrimination and social inclusion**. Consequently, civil society organisations pointed out that they expect the **Forum to advise** by feeding into EU and national policy developments, **to monitor** by following integration policies at national and European levels and **to advocate** by bringing forward new issues and areas for reform.

During the debate following the interventions of civil society representatives the need to establish links between national, regional and local authorities and the Forum was again underlined. Greater participation of and greater attention to **female immigrants** were also mentioned as crucial issues to be addressed, together with the problems faced by **so-called second or third generation** immigrants, who sometimes do not feel "integrated" even if they are Europeans. The delicate questions of who should decide that a person is integrated or not, and when the immigrant becomes a full citizen, were also raised.

Furthermore, participants considered that an **evaluation of European Union's funding for integration** would be useful in order to find out how funding matches political priorities. Participants also came to the conclusion that **shared terms of reference** and knowledge of the European political agenda are essential for the Forum to be effective. Therefore the Common Basic Principle on Integration and The Hague Programme should be at the basis of the joint work. One of the main challenges ahead for the Forum is indeed how to link the priorities of civil society to those of the European Union. The agenda of the Forum should therefore be related to that of the European Union, which will be reflected in the **Stockholm programme** and in **priorities of the Spanish Council Presidency**.

### **Workshops and debate**

Workshops were held on the consequences of the current economic crisis on the integration of immigrants, on the role and methods of the Forum in contributing to the

development of the future EU agenda for integration, on the promotion of dialogue platforms at national level and on the inclusion of immigrants in decision-making.

As regards the **working method** the Forum should adopt, participants underlined the importance of **working with written documents**, which would help focussing the discussion and disseminating the results of the exchanges. This could be done also through the European Web Site on Integration. Moreover, the Forum should aim to create links and **synergies with the EU Council Presidencies** and **with the network of the National Contact Points on Integration** at European level and **with the existing platforms at national level**. At the same time, the need for civil society to get organised and to come to common positions was underlined, as well as a commitment to report back in order to inform their networks and to support a wide dissemination of information.

**Participants agreed that (virtual) working groups** should be created, according to available resources, in order to allow the Forum to follow more closely specific themes. Working groups could in particular deal with the following issues: **capacity building, political participation, elaboration of guidelines for the creation of fora at national level**. It was also suggested that **immigrant organisations** could also create a specific working group, where they could discuss issues of common interest and strengthen their ability to network at European level. The issue of **funding for integration** emerged again. Participants pointed out that funding is an essential element, allowing civil society organisations to carry out political analysis and advocacy. Therefore, funding should be directly accessible also for immigrant organisations and existing barriers should be removed.

## **Conclusions**

The meeting was concluded by representatives of the European Commission and of the European Economic and Social Committee who thanked the participants for the very fruitful exchanges. Concrete proposals on how the Forum should work and on issues that it should address were an important output of the two-day meeting. The wish was expressed that European Integration Forum would contribute to the EU agenda on integration by providing inputs to the next Ministerial Conference on Integration, which

will take place under the Spanish Council presidency in Spring 2010 and by supporting the implementation of the Stockholm programme, which will be the framework for the activities in the area of justice, freedom and security for the next five years. The European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee furthermore encouraged the Forum to be proactive and to suggest issues of common concern.

As dissemination of information was recognised as a crucial element for the success of the Forum, participants were warmly invited to profit from the **European Web Site on Integration** by actively using it for networking and for information sharing. Finally, the creation of a **Bureau** of the Forum was announced. This would consist of two representatives of civil society organisations, a representative of the Commission and a representative of the Economic and Social Committee and would support the organisation of meetings of the Forum. The Bureau would be formally established at the next meeting of the Forum; until when a provisional Bureau would act in its place. Participants were encouraged to come forward as candidates for the Bureau.

The convenors closed by stating that they were looking forward to the second meeting of the Forum, which should take place before the end of the year.