

Racial discrimination and the global economic downturn

Racial discrimination in the world of work is on the increase in the aftermath of the global economic downturn, posing tough questions about policies that have been pursued over the past decade. Gary Humphreys reports.

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For Lisa Wong, Senior Declaration Officer in the ILO's Programme on Promoting the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, the reports that racial discrimination in the world of work is on the increase in the aftermath of the global economic downturn come as no surprise.

"Ethnic minorities face discrimination in the labour market and limited access to education and health care even when the economy is going well," she says, "and in downturns those problems are exacerbated."

Wong also notes that pro-cyclical austerity packages that have been introduced by governments concerned about debt levels can add to the woes of minorities, especially where social assistance or integration programmes are impacted. Finally, ethnic minorities, like migrant workers, become more vulnerable to scapegoating during downturns, and are easy targets for the racist rhetoric of political extremists, which of course feeds into further discrimination.

While the drivers of racial discrimination and the socioeconomic exclusion it gives rise to are well understood, monitoring them is not easy. "One of the key problems we face with regard to this issue is measurement," says Wong, referring to the ILO's recently published report *Equality at work: The continuing challenge*. "The frequent unavailability of data and the absence of a clear definition of the grounds of discrimination at the national level make it hard to monitor progress and to target initiatives," she says. There is thus an urgent need for governments to commit to putting in place the human, technical and financial resources needed to improve data collection.

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One of the best proxy indicators of discrimination in the world of work is the unemployment rate, and here the evidence that certain racial minorities are being particularly hard hit in the current economic downturn is solid. For example, in the United States, Department of Labor numbers show marked differences in outcomes for African-Americans compared with whites or indeed other minorities. Indeed the unemployment rate remains almost twice as high for African-Americans relative to the white population in the United States, and the gap has widened since the beginning of the crisis.

"The situation faced by people of African descent is a matter of particular concern around the globe," says Wong, noting that trends comparable to those reported in the United States can also be seen in Europe. In South Africa there is higher unemployment for blacks compared to the white minority, and lower representation of blacks in top management positions.

According to Rafaela Egg, a Brazil-based ILO specialist in gender and racial equality in the world of work, Brazil too is affected, data showing that the unemployment rate among "black" and "brown" workers stands at around 10.1 per cent, compared to 8.2 per cent among white workers. "Part of the problem in the country is the widespread perception that Brazil does not suffer from racial discrimination," Egg says. "Racial issues have not been highlighted enough because of that."

Limited progress

While the economic downturn is certainly having a negative impact on racial discrimination in the world of work, the truth is that even before 2008 progress in this area was limited. “Since 2001, when the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) against racial discrimination was first drawn up, there has been very little change,” says Wong. This lack of progress was noted at the Durban Review Conference held in Geneva in April 2009 which called for UN member States to take effective measures to prevent the emergence of movements based on racism and discriminatory ideas. ([Strengthening the fight against racism and discrimination: UNESCO's achievements from the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance to the 2009 Durban Review Conference](#))

That is not to say that there have been no attempts to initiate change. In Europe, for example, there have been a number of initiatives to promote generic skills development and the economic participation of Roma and Travellers, notably in Bulgaria and Ireland. The predicament of the Roma in Europe is a matter of considerable concern with regard to acts of discrimination and xenophobia, and a number of stakeholders have focused efforts on improving their situation. In Slovakia, which has come under fire from Amnesty International for its treatment of Roma, US Steel Kosice, a subsidiary of United States Steel, has developed a project focused on promoting employment for citizens of the village Velka Ida, where 40 per cent of the population is Romani.

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Paul Abell, diversity consultancy and associate partner at Leeuwendaal, a Netherlands-based independent specialist in personnel, management and organization, and legal advice.

At the national level, Finland stands out in its proactive position on racial discrimination, and in December of 2009 it launched a National Policy on Roma which promotes the participation of Roma in vocational education and training and supports their access to the labour market. The vision of the Government is that by 2017, Finland will be a front-runner in Europe in promoting the equal treatment and inclusion of the Roma population.

However, such initiatives are few and far between and the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) states that racial discrimination against Roma is still common throughout Europe and contributes to their exclusion and poverty. Many Roma remain uneducated and unemployed, living in segregated, substandard housing, and facing much lower life expectancy than that of non-Roma. Needless to say, the absence of education, training and work experience is a huge barrier to labour market participation.

There have also been a number of microcredit schemes and vocational training programmes such as the Gypsy Development Programme launched in Spain. Also notable is the START programme in Hungary, and the Traveller Internship Programme in Ireland. For Wong, these kinds of initiatives are useful but more of them are needed, and those that are up and running would benefit greatly from stronger coherence and cooperation.

Affirmative action questioned

Meanwhile, questions are beginning to be raised about the value of mainstays of anti-discrimination strategies such as affirmative action or quota systems “In my many years of working on racial discrimination in the workplace I have never seen affirmative action work,” says Paul Abell, Associate of the Amsterdam-based diversity consultancy Leeuwendaal.

For Abell, affirmative action programmes tend to create resentment in the majority group which can perceive itself as being discriminated against, while the minority being supported can feel stigmatized.

For Wong, however, it is too early to give up on affirmative action. “The impact of affirmative action programmes in achieving their objectives is still being debated,” she says, “but there is evidence that points to their usefulness. It may just be that the process needs more time to show clear results.” Wong also points to bodies such as the South African Commission for Employment Equity, which has cautioned against abandoning affirmative action programmes too soon, saying that any progress that had been made could easily be lost if a specific date was set to end affirmative action in South Africa.

Despite the prevailing gloom about progress on racial discrimination in the workplace, Abell believes that greater diversity is inevitable in the future, given demographic trends in European countries. “Countries like the Netherlands are ageing and they need to make better use of their minorities and immigrants,” he says. “So there will be more of an effort to pursue diversity policies.” Abell says that he already sees construction companies focusing on diversity strategies as they think about their future workforce needs. “They are already looking around for workers to take jobs in the coming years. And they know those workers will not necessarily be white.”

THE NEED FOR BETTER DATA

Hard data on racial discrimination is notoriously difficult to acquire, and often comes down to some kind of self-reporting. And while such reporting may be indicative of underlying trends, it relies heavily on individuals’ interpretation of what is happening. Data based on employment discrimination complaints are similarly “soft”, though again may be indicative. There is certainly no shortage of numbers. For example in 2009, 45 per cent of all employment discrimination complaints received by the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism in Belgium were race-related; and of these, 36.5 per cent concerned access to employment while 56.1 per cent concerned conditions of work. The Australian Human Rights Commission reported similar figures, while in France, HALDE (*Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations et pour l’Egalité*), which focuses on combating discrimination and promoting equality, reported that race discrimination remained the main reason for discrimination complaints.

The problem with such data is that in some contexts rising complaints may actually indicate progress, reflecting a better understanding of what discrimination is or increased trust in the impartiality and efficiency of the judiciary or other redress systems or such complaints may be indicative of other factors altogether. In the United States, for example, the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC) recently reported a record number of workplace racial discrimination complaints for 2010. Spokeswoman Justine Lisser pointed out that the spike might reflect economic hard times rather than an increase in racial discrimination per se, arguing that when people are less likely to find a new job, they are more inclined to file a charge of discrimination. For Patrick Taran, Senior Migration Specialist at the ILO’s International Migration Programme, the lack of hard data is a problem not just because it makes monitoring difficult, but because it also gives people an excuse for inaction. “We really need focus on data collection so that we can target responses better and so that people can’t say, ‘We don’t have data on this so the problem doesn’t exist or we don’t have the data so we can’t address the problem’.”