The economic case for equality in Ireland

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Abstract

The economic case for greater equality has been an increasing topic of academic debate over the past decade. Even though there are a number of studies that tackle the issue of discrimination in Ireland, the economic case for equality is not well developed. This report highlights some important contributions in the field of non-discrimination, diversity and equality in the labour market, and stresses the need to develop further research on the costs and benefits of antidiscrimination policies. Investment in so-called ‘virtuous circles’ of greater equality and economic success has become standard practice across a growing number of companies and corporations worldwide. The cost for companies of ignoring the importance of diversity and equal opportunity policies can be directly translated into the high cost of replacing employees who leave because of lack of opportunities or discrimination within the workplace. This report shows how measuring issues such as discrimination and equality is a crucial task, while being very challenging and difficult to achieve. Several studies have established that diversity measurement is not just about numbers and representation by grounds. It is about measurement in the context of employee functions in the work environment. This report examines a variety of sources: from socioeconomic academic studies on discrimination, reports by NGOs, the Central Statistics Office, the Equality Authority, trade unions and business associations, among others.

Key words
Ireland, discrimination, labour market, diversity, economics, equality, economic case for equality

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Introduction

There is a significant distinction between the economic case for equality and the economic case for anti discrimination with the latter forming a key subset of any equality framework. The case for greater economic equality has been an increasing topic of academic debate over the past decade. There is well established body of research that shows the costs of economic inequality across a wide range of areas and issues including health, education, crime and which indicates that almost all social and environmental problems are more likely to occur in a less equal society (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

The economic case for anti discrimination has a narrower focus being primarily concerned with the costs and benefits of diversity in the workplace. Diversity in this context is understood as a business strategy that not only yields individual engagement and performance benefits but also assists organisations in improving their bottom line, innovation and decision-making.

At EU level, a landmark contribution was the EU Commission Report the cost and benefits of “workforce diversity” (2003). The key benefits of diversity initiatives cited by companies included: strengthened cultural values within the organisations; enhanced companies reputation; attraction and retention of highly talented workers; improved innovation and creativity among employees; enhanced service levels and customer satisfaction; help in overcoming labour shortages; reduce labour turnover; lower absence rate-, improved access to new market segments; avoided litigation costs; and improved global management capacity. In terms of cost and obstacles that limit the scale of investment in diversity policies, the report included: legal restrictions on the holding and processing of sensitive data; differences in national cultural responses to different social groups; difficulties in changing the culture of business; and a lack of awareness amongst companies about diversity policies.

Within Ireland, there have been quite a number of recent reports on the economic case for anti-discrimination including for example the 2007 report The Business Impact of Equality and Diversity and the 2008 report New Models of High Performance Work System (Monks 2007). These reports, commissioned by the National Centre for Partnership & Performance and the Equality Authority, examine the nature of management and workplace practices in Irish-based private sector companies and present compelling evidence that equality and diversity strategies, workplace partnership, and flexible working systems have a positive impact on labour productivity, innovation and the wellbeing of employees. Furthermore, a recently published report on age friendly provision of goods and services in Ireland by the Equality Authority and the Health Service Executive showed that the presence and participation of older staff are the keys to enhance the relevance, attractiveness and accessibility of goods and services to older customer.

A significant resource to companies on the topic of the benefits of increased diversity was the IBEC Guidelines (2009) which were premised on the basis that diversity in human capital brings increased competitiveness to companies in Ireland (McGann 2009). They offer practical assistance to companies and employers for implementing effective human resource practices paying particular attention to the grounds of age; disability; race/ethnicity and culture; sexual orientation; and gender.
There are important disparities between the Irish data collected at national level and the data presented in European reports about Ireland on issues of discrimination and equality and it is important to take into account internal and cross-national inconsistencies of the data. Ireland is one of the few countries in the EU in which a national statistical agency, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) produces a report on equality that covers the nine grounds of non-discrimination (CSO 2007). This report constitute a pivotal source for stakeholders, researchers and anyone working on issues of equality, non-discrimination across all grounds covered by Irish legislation.

Even though there are a number of studies that tackle the issue of discrimination in Ireland, the economic case for antidiscrimination is not well developed. For the purpose of this report, we consulted various types of documents, from socioeconomic academic studies about discrimination, reports by NGOs, the Central Statistics Office, the Equality Authority, Trade Unions and business associations, among others. This report shows some important contributions in the field of non-discrimination, diversity and equality in the labour market, and stresses the need to develop further research on the costs and benefits of antidiscrimination policies.

1. Research and studies on the economic case for anti-discrimination

The Equality Rights Alliance (ERA), a coalition of over 155 civil society groups, commissioned Niall Crowley (2011) to develop a “Roadmap” to strengthened equality and human rights infrastructure in Ireland. The main principle that guided the project was that investing in equality and human rights is a way out of the economic recession and consolidating Ireland’s future (Crowley 2011). This roadmap was endorsed by key institutions that work on all grounds of non-discrimination in Ireland. The initiative is composed of four elements: laws, institutions, policy instruments and policy strategies, and is developed on the foundations of the infrastructure already in place in Ireland. The roadmap emphasises the fulfilment of human rights, a challenge that the author considers has not been adequately addressed by the Irish equality and human rights infrastructure. This roadmap constitutes a valuable source to analyse how Ireland is implementing national, European and international equality instruments.

Equality legislation that outlaws discrimination has been implemented in EU member states for the past decades. However, inequalities and discrimination still persist in the European context. A recent edited volume based on the papers presented at a conference in Dublin in 2010, Making Equality Count, presents evidence from an interdisciplinary perspective about international experiences in measuring equality and discrimination across Europe (Bond et al. 2010).

In that book, Rich analyses net discrimination rates in studies from seven countries (UK, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Sweden, and the USA) of hiring in the labour market testing for discrimination on the basis of race. The author shows significant levels of discrimination, for instance, Africans in Ireland face a net
discrimination rate of 48.2% and Asians 35.3%. The study analyses net discrimination in grounds such as ethnic origin, sexual orientation, age, nationality, sexual orientation, obesity and gender. The author concludes that it is “alarming” that these results over the last decade report the same findings as those conducted over the period 1966 to 2000 (Rich 2010).

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and the Equality Think-Tank TASC launched a report on Income Inequality - The H.E.A.P. report (Hierarchy of Earnings, Attributes and Privilege). This report illustrates the structural inequalities that divide Irish society. It indicates that income distribution became more unequal between 1987 and 2005. The main thesis of the report is that the improvement of the well-being of the poorest must also imply addressing the gap between the poor and the rich (McDonough and Loughrey 2009).

In terms of anti-discrimination rather than economic inequality, a report published by the European commission in 2003 looked at issues of diversity policies and the cost and benefits of “workforce diversity”. The report draws upon two EU antidiscrimination Directives: the Directive 2000/43/EC about the implementation of the principle of equal treatment between persons regardless their race or ethnic origin; and the Directive 2000/78/EC that established a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, which covers the grounds of religion, disability, age and sexual orientation (EC 2003). Among the key benefits of diversity initiatives cited by companies, the report included: strengthened cultural values within the organisations; enhanced companies reputation; attraction and retention of highly talented workers; improved innovation and creativity among employees; enhanced service levels and customer satisfaction; help in overcoming labour shortages; reduce labour turnover; lower absence rates, improved access to new market segments; avoided litigation costs; and improved global management capacity. In terms of cost and obstacles that limit the scale of investment in diversity policies, the report included: legal restrictions on the holding and processing of sensitive data; differences in national cultural responses to different social groups; difficulties in changing the culture of business; and a lack of awareness amongst companies about diversity policies.

A publication commissioned by the Irish Business and Employers’ Confederation (IBEC, 2009) and supported by the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission, offers guidelines to companies and employers for implementing effective human resource practices that includes diversity in the workplace (McGann 2009). The guidelines constitute an important resource on diversity management with the premise that diversity in human capital brings competitiveness to the companies. The guideline pays particular attention to grounds of age; disability; race/ethnicity and culture; sexual orientation; and gender.

The author addresses the need to move from an “equal opportunity” approach to a new way forward, in which diversity constitutes the new framework. Diversity is understood as a business strategy that not only yields individual engagement and performance benefits but also assists organisations in improving their bottom line, innovation and decision-making.
A recently published report on age friendly provision of goods and services in Ireland by the Equality Authority and the Health Service Executive reaffirmed previous findings that showed that the presence and participation of older staff are the keys to enhance the relevance, attractiveness and accessibility of goods and services to older customers. The report recommends taking actions to support the recruitment and retention of older workers, particularly through flexible working arrangements, training to provide older workers to further develop their knowledge and skills, and towards a recruitment strategy to target older workers and to address the particular barriers they experience in seeking to return to work. The benefits that come from the recruitment and retention of older workers include: 1) access to a valuable source of employees; 2) achieving the business benefits of a diverse age workforce that reduced turnover and absenteeism; and 3) a staff mix that reflects age diversity in the customer sector (EA and HSE, 2010).

A report commissioned by the National Centre for Partnership & Performance and the Equality Authority (2008), examines the nature of management and workplace practices in Irish-based private sector companies (Flood et al. 2008). The report shows compelling evidence that equality and diversity strategies, workplace partnership, and flexible working systems have a positive impact on labour productivity, innovation and the wellbeing of employees.

The Irish Business and Employers’ Confederation (IBEC) recently published guidelines on Human Resources for employers that includes issues of equality and diversity as part of a competitive and modern “business environment” (IBEC 2009). The guide compiles the results of the IBEC survey of HRM practices in companies in Ireland in 2008. The report shows HR practices in place in companies in Ireland, which together employ over 100,000 employees. Due to its scope, this report constitutes a valuable source to tackle diversity and equality in the business sector.

A new study led by the UCD School of Social Justice and commissioned by the ICCL: ”A Critical Review of Anti-discrimination Law in Ireland”, aims to build a comprehensive picture of the factors that inhibit and support the operation of Irish anti-discrimination law. The study combines archival research and primary qualitative data. It aims to generate new knowledge about the law’s operation in practice through 1) case-tracking of participants in discrimination law cases; 2) interviews with key stakeholders and legal practitioners; and 3) focus groups with individuals who represent the discriminatory grounds and work in relevant fields as advocates or advice providers.

A recently report based on a symposium organized Amnesty International-Ireland, analyses the intersections between human rights and economic policies. The various authors address the idea that economic growth is not enough to tackle poverty and deliver human rights; an economic policy that includes inequality is also required. The report draws upon the premises that states have three obligations in terms of human rights: to respect, to protect and to fulfil. In terms of equality and non-discrimination, states have also the immediate obligation not to discriminate: “The state must not only refrain from discriminating itself, but must also protect against discrimination by non-state agents (Pp8)” (AI 2011). The report offers important tools and reflections from the economic field that could be applied to human rights and at the level of the state and other organisations.
2. Costs and benefits of diversity and equality

The literature reviewed shows that the benefits of diversity in the labour market include: helping to attract and retain highly talented people; Improved motivation and efficiency of existing staff; Strengthened cultural values within the organisation; Enhanced corporate reputation; Improved innovation and creativity among employees; Enhanced service levels and customer satisfaction; Helping to overcome labour shortages; Reduced labour turnover; Lowered absenteeism rates; Improved access to new market segments; Avoided litigation costs; and Improved global management capacity (EC 2003).

Investment in so called ‘virtuous circles’ of greater equality and economic success has become standard practice across a growing number of companies and corporations worldwide. Some of these transnational companies such as Google, IBM, Dell and Microsoft have been creating a culture of equality and competitiveness in the private sector in Ireland (Collins 2009). The cost for companies of ignoring the importance of diversity and equal opportunity policies can be directly translated into the high cost of replacing employees who leave because of lack of opportunities or discrimination within the workplace. Absenteeism is another high cost for companies and related to this is non-motivation where employees feel undervalued or experience discrimination, harassment or bullying. There are other costs also such as legal costs from employees taking cases against companies that do not protect their minority employees. This situation can seriously damage a company’s reputation and brand in the market. Productivity can also be reduced due to the lack of an efficient policy on diversity, as well as increased conflict within the workplace, increased management costs and poor internal communications (Monks 2007). International research show when organisations actively implement diversity strategies, multiple benefits are reported such as increased adaptability from employees who came from different backgrounds and experiences. These employees usually incorporate innovative ideas that are flexible in adapting to fluctuating markets and customers’ demands. A diverse collection of skills and experiences allows a company to provide service to customers on a global scope. Companies that incorporate diversity in the workplace inspire all other employees to perform to their higher ability, which is translated into higher productivity and return on investment (Greenberg 2009).

The economic costs of inequality in terms of health, literacy, school participation rates, crime etc. are evidenced in numerous studies in Ireland and internationally. The costs of discrimination fall within that remit but studies measuring the effect of discrimination tend to focus, for data and methodological reasons, on the benefits of anti-discrimination legislation and policies rather than on the costs of discrimination per se. Thus studies tend to show the existence of discrimination (e.g. in labour market recruitment and hiring) and the benefits of diversity (in terms of innovation, for example). The cost of discrimination tends to be implied rather than measured directly.

As part of the TILDA research described in the previous report on Ageing, scholars from different backgrounds have published studies that tackles the economic situation of older people in Ireland. One of these studies focuses on income, wealth and assets and examines the factors that influence the distribution of these variables across older people: age, educational attainment, household structure, labour supply and occupation are all related to income levels and asset
holdings (O’Sullivan and Layte 2011). The author shows alarming inequality amongst older people in terms of income, due basically to educational attainment, which demonstrate the need of incorporating a more comprehensive approach to social welfare policy that looks at these structural inequalities. In other words, policy changes will impact older people differently in relation of their particular financial position. In concert with this study, Mosca and Barret demonstrate that more educated, healthier and more satisfied older people are more likely to be in the labour force (Mosca and Barret, 2011). Next waves from the TILDA longitudinal study are expected to provide a better picture of the situation of older people in Ireland, particularly related to their economic situation.

The following tables illustrate the effects of discrimination in two key areas, health and education among key populations: ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, Travellers and economically disadvantaged individuals. It is based on secondary data and studies carried out by diverse academic institutions, the Government, NGOs and other institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table No 1</th>
<th>Effects of discrimination in the area of health</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Effects</strong></td>
<td>Despite significant improvements in health and life expectancy on Ireland, recent Irish and international research findings on health inequalities and the social determinants of health show the causes of health inequalities are rooted in deeply embedded structural inequalities in society. These structural inequalities relate to class relations and to inequalities in access to material resources, conditions and opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Agent bearing Cost</strong></td>
<td>Increasing discrimination</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnic minorities</strong></td>
<td>Research indicates that misconceptions and negative attitudes towards immigrants from racial minority groups had increased in the last years. Racism and social exclusion intersect with migrants’ legal status as “non-citizens”, which means lesser rights and entitlements, and imposes structural barriers to participation in society.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual minorities</strong></td>
<td>Sexual minorities continue to experience consistent levels of homophobia and discrimination in places such as schools, work environment and services.</td>
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The Irish general population has experienced major attitudinal changes towards homosexuality and the rights of LGBT populations (strongly negative attitudes towards homosexuality had declined to 38% in 1990-2000 from 62% in 1981), but Ireland still remains on the “conservative side of the European average”.

School and the workplace clearly constitute contexts for harassment and discrimination for LGBT people. A recent report shows that the greater the support, inclusion and equality for LGBT people, the lesser the minority stress (Mayock et al. 2009).

Despite the recent introduction of Civil unions for same-sex couples, health services for these couples are still under the discretion of health providers (Pillinger 2008).

**Travellers**

There is evidence of strong prejudice against Travellers. For instance 79.4% “would be reluctant to buy a house next door to a Traveller” (Mac Gréil 2010).

Members of the Traveller community constitute the most disadvantaged group in the labour market among minorities in Ireland.

Travellers are one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Irish society and 40% of Irish people report feeling uncomfortable with Traveller people which is well above the EU27 average of 24% (CSO 2008).

Health indicators such as life expectancy at birth and mortality rates for all ages continue to be grossly unequal for Irish Travellers compared to the general population. Suicide rates are nearly 7 times higher in Traveller men compared with the general male population (Kelleher et al. 2010).

**Unemployed and lower SES**

As expected in the times of economic recession, the most economically disadvantaged are the ones most impacted through rising unemployment, static, or falling social welfare payments and reduced public expenditure on education and health.

The annual directly standardised mortality rate in the lowest occupational class was significantly (over 130%) higher than the rate in the highest occupational class (IPH 2011).

Consistent poverty rates are higher for those with worse self-reported health, chronic illness or disability. Evidence shows that poorer people die younger and experience more diseases that the wealthier population.
Table No 2
Effects of discrimination in the area of education

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>Agent bearing cost</th>
<th>Education outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Educational outcomes reflect social exclusion and the inequalities that are still present in Irish society. While 31% of the total population aged 25 and over have attained third level or higher education, only 17% of disabled people and 1% of Irish Travellers have achieved the same.</td>
<td>Increasing discrimination</td>
<td>Lone parents tend to have lower employment rates and they have lower participation rates in third level education at 23% compared to 34% rate for other parents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lone parents</td>
<td>Lone parents are more likely than any other social group to be living in poverty. 33% of lone parents were living in consistent poverty, compared to 7% of the total population (CSO 2008). This situation creates a “poverty trap” that limits their mobility routes out of poverty.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The immigrant population</td>
<td>See previous table.</td>
<td>The immigrant population has higher levels of education than the White Irish nationals, which illustrates the high qualifications of the immigrant population in Ireland(CSO 2007). However, immigrants are earning less and working in occupations below their level of qualifications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveller community</td>
<td>There is an over representation of Travellers among the unemployed despite the existence of programmes that aim to improve access to the labour market for people from minority ethnic groups. Irish Travellers fare poorly on every indicator used to measure disadvantage: unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, health status, infant mortality, gender equality, life expectancy, among others.</td>
<td>Only 15% of Irish Travellers, aged 25-44, had secondary level education compared to the national average of 49%. This situation is more dramatic in third level education, where less than one percent of Irish Travellers accessed this level, compared to the national average of 31% (CSO 2007).</td>
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3. Methodological issues

All studies and reports reviewed agreed that measuring issues such as discrimination and equality is a crucial task, but very challenging and difficult to achieve. There is a considerable body of literature in Ireland that tackles these issues from a variety of approaches: sociological, economic and legislative. Specifically the book, Making Equality Count (Bond et al, 2010), address the range of different methodologies that can be employed to investigate equality and discrimination and it highlights the different strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches including self-reports of discrimination; statistical analysis of differential outcomes; surveys; field studies and laboratory techniques.

During the Symposium on Economics and Human Rights organised by Amnesty International Ireland (AI 2011), Eoin Rooney from NICEM (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities), points out that for more than a decade scholars are facing the challenge to link human rights with economic approaches. He considers that economists can assist with methodological approaches to measure inequality through three techniques: a) cost-benefit analysis; b) cost effectiveness analysis; and c) multi-criteria analysis. A proposed complementary task is to involved governments in this process making it mainstreaming. In other words, integrating these tools into all aspects of government decision-making through a fluid mutual dialogue between the field of human rights and economics.

There is a lack of initiatives that include monitoring the process of implementation of equality strategies. Several reports, as part of their recommendations, stress the need to develop systematic ways to monitoring the fulfilment of objectives and targets set in government plans to combat discrimination and promote equality and diversity in the labour market.

We think that a mixed methods strategy is the adequate approach to launch a study on the economic case of discrimination at EU level. The studies reviewed showed the limitations of analysing discrimination based on single methods and the need to interpret the results in conjunction with findings generated through other research methodologies. We consider that the strategies and techniques listed below can constitute a more valid and useful tool for approaching to this complex phenomenon at EU level:

- **Direct and indirect discrimination**, this EU study should start by defining direct and indirect forms of discrimination across European societies. Based on the literature revised, indirect discrimination is the most challenging and difficult to measure because the cause of discrimination can seem “neutral” or harmless, so it can remain hidden or “invisible” for the majority of the population. Some scholars show the difficulties of measuring discrimination and inequalities because it is very difficult for an individual to know they have been discriminated against in the context of job recruitment and access to jobs. For instance, recent research conducted between 2000-2010 found that access to job was restricted for racial minorities, women, older and obese individuals; access to housing was restricted to racial and sexual minorities. In these cases, individuals discriminated against ignored that the selection was biased because of their minority status (Rich 2010).
• **Legislation**, a comprehensive analysis of EU, international and national legislation related to equality and non-discrimination frameworks. This legislative background would offer key elements to understand the country position within equality and human rights legislation.

• **Self-report discrimination**, in which respondents are asked directly about their experiences about discrimination. This can be done at both levels: among the general population and among particular groups who are considered “vulnerable” in society. Some scholars considered that this approach itself could be insufficient due to the fact that some groups appear to under-report discrimination, while others appear to over-report.

• **Socio-demographic information**, data on the economic and social position of the groups identified in equality legislation should be gathered (e.g. women, Travellers, migrants, disabled people, etc). This data should be comparable and the same criteria should be applied to all groups analysed.

• **Statistical analysis of differential outcomes**, by which the method compares measures of outcomes across groups and statistically adjust for non-discriminatory sources of difference e.g. education, skills, experience, among others. Residual differences that remain after these factors are controlled are commonly attributed to discrimination (Bond et al. 2010).

• **Perceptions of the general population or groups**, approach that can complement the ones above and provide a general picture about attitudes and perceptions towards particular groups in society.

• **Ethnographic studies**, this qualitative approach can provide dense, detailed and rich information about the lives of particular groups, for instance discrimination in the work environment. This approach can contribute to the “visibility” of hidden populations that traditional measures usually do not capture appropriately (e.g. Travellers, LGBT populations, etc.).

Each of these methods have strengths and weaknesses and it is important to “triangulate” or combine different approaches in order to design a comprehensive approach that can be useful to gather relevant information about this complex phenomenon.
4. Resonance of the debate in the society

The 2009 Eurobarometer survey, *Discrimination in the EU* in 2009, showed that the perception of discrimination is still widespread among the EU member states. Ireland scores below the EU average in all grounds considered: racial or ethnic origin (61% in EU vs. 46% in Ireland); age (58% vs. 36%); disability (53% vs. 36%); sexual orientation (47% vs. 30%) and religion or belief (40% vs. 20%) (EC 2009). As described in previous reports, these positive perceptions of the Irish population contrast with the lived experiences of vulnerable population.

In terms of the presence of the notion of diversity in the media in Ireland, across all grounds for discrimination, Irish respondents share the general view that diversity is not sufficiently reflected in the media. This perception is particularly widespread for the ground of disability (33%), sexual orientation (28%), ethnic origin (27%), Religion or belief (27%), and age (25%). Because discrimination based on racial origin continues to be the most widespread through the EU, respondents were asked to indicate whether they support or oppose two measures: monitoring the composition of the work-force, and monitoring the recruitment procedures. The vast majority of the Irish population support these two initiatives, particularly the second one: 61% support monitoring the composition of the work-force to evaluate the representation of people from ethnic minorities (52% in EU) in order to evaluate the representation of citizens from ethnic minority background; and 69% support monitoring the recruitment procedures to ensure that candidates from ethnic backgrounds have the same chance of being selected for interview or hired as other candidates with similar skills and qualifications (67% in EU).

The general election in February 2011 produced a new coalition government constituting the Final Gael and Labour. In terms of LGBT issues their programme for government includes the implementation of the tax elements of the Civil Partnership legislation. Organisations such as GLEN argues the need to progress urgent issues for LGBT people such as the implementation of the tax elements of Civil Partnership, the inclusion of same-sex headed families in broader reforms of family law and lesbian and gay people in proposals to regulate Assisted Human Reproduction; and the fact that competitive advantages and economic benefits of diversity and equality need to be further developed and supported in economic policies. It also implies the contribution of the equality infrastructure to the economy as well as social development (GLEN 2011).

In terms of perceptions of whether enough has been done to increase diversity in the workplace, the majority of Irish respondents are positive about the level of what has been done in areas of gender (65%), ethnic origin (63%), age (59%), religion or belief (59%), disability (56%), and sexual orientation (56%). These percentages are consistently higher than the EU27 average.

In a recent conference held in Dublin in May 2011, Professor Wilkinson stated that inequality is likely to increase in Ireland during the current economic clime, which will lead to the rise in health and social problems. Wilkinson called attention about the “worst possible combination” for Irish society: high unemployment and cuts in public services that will increase the gap between the rich and the poor creating the perfect scenario for issues such as mental health issues, violence, among other social problems. Based on more than thirty years of research, Wilkinson and
Pickett concluded that unequal societies have worse outcome in terms of health and social problems. Economic growth per se will not lead to a happier, healthier or more successful populations. As an example, only in the UK case, the evidence suggests that if we halved inequality most social and health indicators would improve: mental illness could reduce by two thirds, obesity could halve, imprisonment could reduce by 80%, teen births could reduce by 80% and levels of trust could increase by 85% (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). In other words, a bigger gap between the rich and the poor worsens health and social problems in the total population. Indicators such as life expectancy, infant mortality, homicides, imprisonment, teenage births, level of trust, obesity, mental illness, among others, are consistently worse in unequal countries. As Wilkinson and Pickett state, there is no relation between income per capita and social wellbeing in wealthy countries. Ireland is just below the group of the top countries in relation to inequalities (e.g. USA, Portugal, UK, New Zealand), which represents a real challenge taking into account the current economic crisis.

An integrated strategy between employers and Trade Unions and supported by the Irish Government and the Equality Authority was launched in order to develop practical guidelines in effectively managing and responding to cultural diversity in the workplace. The initiative shows a shared commitment to workplaces that are integrated and free from discrimination, particularly for Black and minority ethnic employees including Travellers. The initiative includes the participation of Irish Congress of Trade Unions, IBEC, the Small Firms Association, the Construction Industry Federation, Chambers Ireland, the office of the Minister for Integration and the Equality Authority. This Action Strategy includes a range of initiatives to assist companies and trade unions to manage a culturally diverse workplace and to contribute to and develop an integrated workplace (EA 2008). This strategy could be replicated expanding its scope to other grounds of non-discrimination such as sexual orientation in order to promote a workplace free of discrimination or harassment. The fact that the initiative targets big and small companies constitutes also an example of good practice that can provide tools to other EU member states.

There are some equality and human rights issues that have been highlighted in recent years in the Irish public agenda: human trafficking; significant levels of domestic and sexual violence against women; child protections issues; immigrant and asylum policies; health care systems for mental health patients and people with intellectual disabilities; prison conditions and the criminal justice regime (Crowley 2011) (Crowley 2011). The aim is to develop a case for equality and human rights, particularly in the context of economic recession.

There are several national initiatives intended to create awareness about discrimination and educate the Irish population on issues of equality and cultural diversity. The term “diversity” has become part of the discourse of Government and private institutions as well as in the popular media and social narratives in current Irish society. In addition, “diversity” is understood not only in terms of racial and ethnic issues but also relates to other grounds of non-discrimination such as sexual orientation, age and disability. Despite the existence of a National Action Plan for Social Inclusion in Ireland, minority groups and their families continue to face structural disadvantages due to an inadequate implementation of the equality policies and practices.
Conclusion

Several studies have established that diversity measurement is not just about numbers and representation by grounds. It is about measurement in the context of employee functions in the work environment. We believe that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are necessary to measure the impact of equality in the workplace. Quantitative measurement captures basic representation data such as gender, age, race, among others. It also includes data such as the number of new hires, number of employees with individual development plans, promotions, and accessibility to programmes and services. Qualitative measures are based on activities and outcomes and include employee satisfaction surveys, cultural audits, focus groups, incentive plans, training and education records, customer satisfaction surveys, and employee complaints and grievances (Chinn 2011). Diversity programmes usually have “intangible” results, such as improved communication or teamwork. For this reason, businesses must determine the cost of diversity support programmes and calculate the return on investment: e.g., number of diverse employees in mentoring programmes who are promoted; the level of employee participation in diversity activities, etc.

The CSO carried out the first nationally representative survey on self-reported discrimination in Ireland. The survey collected information about individuals’ own experiences and interpretations of the events. This survey has been a valuable source for several studies about discrimination in Ireland. Russell and colleagues produced particularly relevant interpretation of this data (Russell et al. 2010). Both the CSO survey and the later work done by other scholars based on the survey constitute a good practice that could be replicated in other EU member states.

Research in places such as the UK and France indicates that unions can play a pivotal role in promoting equality, particularly gender equality. The presence of women in the Unions brought not only voices to women’s needs but a framework for public policy with a gender approach. Taking these experiences into consideration, the presence of other minority groups in Unions such as LGBT workers, migrants, race/ethnic minorities, members of the traveller community, etc., could serve as platform for promoting and implementing equality and diversity in the workplace.

Monks (2007) argues that the general approach of unions is a policy based on the “sameness” of equal treatment model and to a lesser extent the “difference” model, which explains why in most countries unions do not include equality and diversity as part of their agenda (Monks 2007). Monks’ report, *The Business Impact of Equality and Diversity* and the report *New Models of High Performance Work Systems* (Flood et a. 2008), constitute key resources to understand the relationship between workplace initiatives on equality and diversity and organisational performance. The reports presents solid evidence for employers and companies to invest in equality and diversity in the workplace not for “altruistic” reasons but because equality and diversity increase business performance. We think these two studies, particularly the one by Monks, could be replicated at EU levels.

Scholars such as Wilkinson and Pickett (2007) provide a comprehensive framework to rethink inequality in modern societies. Their work made it possible to compare the scale of income inequality in different societies and see how the lives of
individuals is affected by how much inequality is presented in their countries. In the same, Baker et al (2008) show how theory on equality can be put into action\(^1\). Theoretical frameworks such as this could be at the foundation of studies and initiatives that tackle inequality and diversity at the EU level. The facts that this study provides can be used to explain the benefits of having more diverse and equal societies, which is not an easy task in the context of economic recession and neoliberal agendas that prioritize economic growth over social inclusion. As Professor Wilkinson stated in a recent conference held in Dublin, most policymakers mistakenly believed a rising national income would improve the health outcomes, happiness and wellbeing of society. He suggested that countries such as Ireland would not recover from its current crisis unless social justice and equality is placed at the centre of its recovery.

The International Finance Office (IFC) in its 2006 Good Practice Notes published interesting case studies on the case of non-discrimination and equality in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, Kenya and Malaysia\(^2\). The report shows how companies in those countries are implementing equality and equal opportunity in grounds such as sexual orientation, race and ethnicity and human rights issues.

References


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