

European Union

The development of proactive measures and concrete actions within the European Union's spheres of influence to address caste discrimination was continuously lobbied for, influencing the EU to take caste discrimination into the policy and human rights dialogues with affected countries in a systematic and transparent manner and for effectively reflecting the issue at the policy and strategic level, including in development cooperation and trade relations. IDSN pursued dialogues on these issues with Members of the European Parliament, the Commission, the Council and EU member states.

IDSN interventions with the EU in June

In the first week of June 2008, IDSN organised a series of interventions with EU institutions in Brussels under the theme "Caste Discrimination in South Asia". With point of departure in the photo exhibition on caste discrimination sponsored by Margrete Auken (Greens, DK), Jean Lambert (Greens-UK), Claude Moraes (PSE-UK) and Maria Martens (PPE, NL) a well attended hearing in the Parliament was held on 3 June, preceded by a press conference. The following day a three-hour round table session had been organised with eight officials from the European Commission, chaired by EuropeAid Director for Asia, Erich Wilhelm Muller. More than 20 meetings were organised with individual MEPs. Teams also met individually with mission officials from Slovenia, France, Sweden and the Netherlands, and with the Human Rights Representative, Riina Kionka (European Council), and Mr. Vincent Guérénd, Deputy Head of Commission Benita Ferrero-Waldner's Cabinet.

The IDSN team included researchers and Dalit leaders from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and representatives of six Dalit Solidarity Networks in Europe.

In addition, the photographer, Jakob Carlsen, and Dennis Weitering from Fatusch Productions, currently producers of the Dutch documentary on Dalit human rights defenders (Outcast Heroes), took part in the events on 3 June.

In all meetings country situations, the new research on caste discrimination in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan, and key issues were covered. The various institutions and individuals were challenged to take effective action within their institutional mandate and scope of work as set out in IDSN's recommendations. A full set of IDSN recommendations to EU institutions is available at www.idsn.org).

The events lifted and enhanced visibility on caste discrimination, creating a deeper understanding by those targeted of the conditions of Dalits. Discussions were held on the manifestations and consequences of caste discrimination from both a human rights and a development perspective and linked to the current responsibilities of the EU.

The interventions have increased the possibility for new initiatives and contributed to paving the way for some of the actions proposed by IDSN to the council and the commission, including the development of a Council policy statement.

Hearing in the European Parliament

Prior to the official opening of the photo exhibition, a hearing “Caste discrimination in South Asia” was held. The hearing programme included presentations of country situations for Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (report on the hearing available at www.idsn.org). Around 100 people participated, among them members of the European Parliament, Council and Commission officials, as well as NGOs. Representatives of embassies of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were also present. The critical questions raised by the audience concerned what exactly the European Union can do vis a vis caste affected countries. Speaking on behalf of the Commission, Mr. Eric Müller, Director of EuropeAid Asia stated clearly that the EU needs “partnership” and the “development of common norms and values” in order to promote the eradication of caste discrimination. In contrast to this, some members of the European Parliament demanded that trade and aid be more conditional. A MEP, Mr. Cashman, concluded the hearing by saying: “Discrimination on the basis of caste must be seen as what it is: A serious human rights violation. I urge the representatives of Governments of caste affected countries, who are present to take back the message that the barbaric practice of caste discrimination has to end”.

The hearing was well covered in media reports. Articles and a report on the hearing can be found at www.idsn.org.

European Commission Round Table

On 4th June, a round table was held with eight officials from the European Commission, presided by EuropeAid Director for Asia, Erich Muller.

Country situations and main issues were presented by the representatives from South Asia. The team put forward demands for proper consideration of caste dynamics in all EU policies, and especially the recommended process of producing a tool for addressing caste-based discrimination. There was some reluctance towards the idea of creating a set of guidelines in addition to existing ones on other issues. Rather the Commission was of the opinion that the Dalit issue could be dealt with under the “minorities” and “other vulnerable groups” category, an idea that the IDSN continuously challenges. It was pointed out that the Commission’s current country strategy papers and other programming documents had very few if any references to caste discrimination and therefore no specific programming measures to address the caste-based human rights violations or to reach Dalits in development efforts. The 2009 CPS review could open new possibilities, though officials stressed that the country level interaction is central.

Erich Muller suggested an annual dialogue meeting between the Commission and the IDSN to take discussions further on the impact of EU programmes in relation to caste-affected groups, also at country level. The Commission officials further pointed to possibilities of funding of projects on caste discrimination under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) framework, and also welcomed the exhibition in a central Commission building.

The IDSN coordinator later in the year met with officials of the Commission to follow up on issues discussed and ways forward.

European Parliament

In June, meetings had also been requested with members of relevant parliamentarian delegations and Committees, including the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Committee of Development, the Sub-Committee of Human Rights and the delegations on India and South Asia. The MEPs generally accepted the

relevance and potential effect of having formal discussions on caste discrimination in the committees and most committed themselves to taking the idea forward. Points on dialogues with member MPs from affected countries, and highlighting the issue during visits and missions to caste affected countries were well taken.

The election in 2009 provides an opportunity to seek members' support for fighting caste discrimination in the run up to the election, an initiative that could be taken forward by a group of MEPs.

IDSN worked with MEPs to ensure relevant references in the Draft Opinion of the Committee on Development for the Committee on International Trade on an EU-India Free Trade Agreement. Several questions were raised by different members of Parliament in the course of the year to the Commission and the Council on the topic including how the institutions had followed up on recommendations of the European Parliament's resolution on the human rights situation of Dalits in India, adopted in 2007.