

**Statement by Mr. Markku Wallin,
Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Labour, Finland**

**OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight against Racism,
Xenophobia and Discrimination – Brussels, 13-14 September 2004**

Session two: The Role of Governments and Civil Society in Promoting Tolerance,
Respect and Mutual Understanding, Particularly through Interfaith and
Intercultural Dialogue and Partnership

Madam Moderator, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tolerance, mutual understanding, equality and respect for one another are the cornerstones of our free and democratic society. Multiculturalism is a resource that brings dynamism and energy to the society as a whole. There exists excellent proof on this in those regions which have taken multiculturalism and tolerance as one of the key tools of their development.

The prohibition of racism and discrimination is an essential element of international human rights law. It is the obligation of governments to ensure that everyone - men, women and children - can participate in the decision-making which has a bearing on their lives.

Unfortunately racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism still remain a problem in many parts of the world, including our own continent. It is therefore vital that we, the OSCE governments –in cooperation with the civil society – do our utmost to fight these very unwelcome phenomena. The strong political will shown at various OSCE Conferences has proved that the member states are committed to this fight.

Madam Moderator,

In reality, minorities often face difficulties in getting their voice heard. The Finnish Government is committed to working closely with the ethnic and religious groups in Finland. I would like to give some concrete examples on how my country is addressing these issues.

1) The Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations (ETNO) is a broad-based consultative expert organ which gives statements, opinions and proposals on matters relating to refugees and migration and on racism and ethnic relations. A variety of linguistic and cultural minorities are broadly represented on the Advisory Board. One half of the Advisory Board's members represent traditional and the other half new ethnic minorities. I have had the pleasure of chairing the Advisory Board for several years already. The experiences on the cooperation between governmental officials and minority groups have been very positive. The mandate of the Advisory Board is currently being renewed to even further increase the role of the ethnic groups in decision-making affecting them. The vision is not to improve the inclusion of the ethnic groups to the society but to develop the society with their help.

2) Another example of well-established cooperation between the Government and the civil society is the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs. An important task of the Advisory Board is to monitor the development of the social participation and living conditions of the Roma in order to promote equality. The Advisory Board is arranging training and seminars for officials and others interested to familiarise themselves with Roma issues.

Madam moderator,

The situation of the Roma people in Europe needs more attention. At the international level the Finnish Government has promoted the initiative of President of the republic Tarja Halonen for setting up of a European Forum for Roma and Travellers. Finland has been active in the negotiations in the Council of Europe and welcomes the progress made recently for the establishment of the Forum. Our aim is to have the Forum start its work at a not too distant future.

To conclude, in Finland we basically view the interaction between NGOs and the Government as a win-win situation. NGOs do not always agree with the Government, but they seem to feel they can benefit from the experience of the Government. On the other hand, Governments need the fresh perspectives, initiatives and information presented by NGOs.

Transparency, participation and cooperation are the key principles in working towards a truly multicultural and tolerant society. This conference offers an excellent opportunity to discuss ways to implement those principles in practice.

Thank you.