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Intercultural Cities:
preparing local communities for the diversity advantage

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SOCIETIES AND IDENTITIES:
THE MULTIFACETED IMPACT OF MIGRATION
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The conceptual framework for discussion about the impact of migration at this event resonates strongly with the Council of Europe's thinking in this field. Concerned primarily with the safeguarding of human rights, democracy, social cohesion and cultural diversity on the European continent, the Council of Europe is focusing on the social and cultural dimensions of integration. In our analysis, an over-reliance on the integration "hardware" – welfare provisions and regulation - has failed to recognise the importance of integration "software" – the readiness of host societies to accept cultural change and to embrace diversity as an asset. It is at the local level that one can work most effectively with the cultural dimension of integration, prepare the wider community or increase the competence of policy-makers, public services and the people in general to understand the context of diversity.

The social, cultural and political stress associated with migration and diversity can destroy the potential of migrants to contribute to host communities, and can threaten community cohesion. It is therefore necessary to help cities strengthen their resistance to the **diversity stress** and create an urban culture of diversity that gives spaces and opportunities for migrants to bring their potential to fruition.

With this challenge in mind, the Council of Europe and the European Commission launched in 2008 a pilot programme to help cities take a culture-sensitive approach to integration. The programme developed, together with 11 pilot cities, an "intercultural integration" approach. This approach focuses on public discourse, the media, and symbolic and cultural actions to create a pluralistic identity of the city. The choice to work at the local level is explained by the need to get away from the complexities of

national identity and invest in a territory with an inclusive image of “we”. The idea is to challenge the dominant integration rhetoric and achieve a situation where migrants are not being integrated into the host society, but where newcomers and locals create a new society together.

In order for the co-creation of this new culture to happen, spatial segregation needs to be reduced and multiple contact zones established between ethnic communities. The Intercultural Cities programme has been designed to enable cities to learn how to do this better, by sharing experiences and access to a broad range of examples and resources for creating shared public spaces.

The concept of intercultural integration

While multiculturalism has celebrated the unique value of each culture and encouraged the development of policies to preserve minority and migrant cultures, it has also often provoked rivalry between ethnic communities for access to power and resources, and has unwillingly increased ethnic ghettoisation. Ethnic clustering is not an issue of concern in itself but becomes one when it develops into segregation – an effective isolation of certain groups which reduces opportunities for contacts, networking, practicing the language of the host community, and active citizenship, and thus perpetrates poverty and exclusion.

Interculturality recognises strongly the need to enable each culture to survive and flourish but underlines also the right of all cultures to contribute to the cultural landscape of the society they are present in. Interculturality derives from the understanding that cultures thrive only in contact with other cultures, not in isolation. It seeks to reinforce inter-cultural interaction as a means of building trust and reinforcing the fabric of the community.

Most importantly, perhaps, interculturality is about requiring a degree of introspection, flexibility and change on behalf of the host population, an integration effort which goes in two directions. It is also about understanding the importance of symbolism, perceptions and discourse in creating a feeling of acceptance, belonging and trust – all too often cities focus on providing material care and assistance to migrants in need while omitting to deal with the symbolism of acceptance/rejection, identity and change.

Taking a strategic approach

The Intercultural Cities programme encourages cities to adopt a comprehensive, strategic approach to intercultural integration. The development of the cultural competence of public authorities and services, the encouragement of intercultural interaction and mixing in the public space is seen not as the responsibility of a single department or officer, but as an essential aspect of the functioning of all city departments and services.

A strategic approach to intercultural integration requires, first and foremost, strong political leadership. The intercultural city cannot emerge without a leadership that explicitly embraces the value of diversity while upholding the values and principles of European societies to avoid cultural relativism. The public statements of the Mayor of Reggio Emilia, one of our pilot cities, in favour of “cultural contamination” are in this sense exceptional and emblematic. All political leaders of cities involved in the Intercultural Cities programme are encouraged to “come out” as strong defenders of the value of diversity for the local community.

Related to the question of leadership is the issue of political discourse – understood in the broad sense of symbolic communication - the way in which public perceptions of diversity are shaped by language, symbols, themes, dates, and other elements of the collective life of the community. Cultural artefacts symbolising the identity of cultures are often first to be destroyed in violent inter-community conflicts – they can convey a powerful message about the plurality of the city identity.

By inviting foreign residents or people of migrant background to speak at the official city celebrations (Neuchâtel); by symbolically decorating a school with the pillar of a Mosque from Pakistan and letters from the alphabets of all languages spoken in the city (Oslo), or inviting migrants to join in the traditional forms of cultural participation such as the preparation of carnivals (Tilburg, Patras), or the adoption of non-stigmatising language (“new generation” rather than “third generation” – Reggio

Emilia) the community makes a symbolic gesture of acceptance and openness to “intercultural transfusion”.

Taking a fresh look at the governance of diversity in the city is another key element of the intercultural integration strategy.

One lesson from the Intercultural Cities programme is that intercultural governance is most effective at the neighbourhood level. Empowering the neighbourhood council to decide on the funding of local projects, as in Berlin Neukölln, to define the targets and success measurements for public services (Tilburg) or to manage cultural conflicts (Reggio Emilia) is a solid way of creating links between people, a sense of community.

Intercultural governance often requires the creation of specialised mediation institutions to manage cultural conflict. For instance, Turin has invested impressive resources in engaging directly at the points of fracture between ethnic communities. The city trains and employs a team of intercultural street mediators to engage directly with young people, street traders, new arrivals and established residents to understand emerging trends, anticipate disputes, find common ground and build joint enterprises. It is creating spaces where intercultural conflict can be addressed, such as the three Casa dei Conflitti (House of Conflict), which are staffed by skilled mediators plus volunteers. A further step is the negotiation of ‘neighbourhood contracts’.

The Intercultural City programme has revealed the crucial importance of addressing explicitly identity fears in the community. Public debates in the form of extensive campaigns, such as the ones organised regularly in Neuchâtel involving citizens, artists, universities, organisations, and public authorities focusing explicitly on changes in the city’s ethnoscape and lifestyles, and helping people to voice their concerns, are a powerful way to deal with “identity stress”. It is significant that following such a campaign last summer on the subject of religion in the city, the canton voted 60% against the minarets motion, and within three months, three cities of the canton allocated Muslim areas in cemeteries - something they had been unable to agree to for a long time prior to the campaign.

But identity fears can also be addressed on an everyday level too, as in the small city of Vic in northern Spain, by specialised street mediators who discuss informally and continuously with residents, especially the elderly, the small disturbances of diversity, such as noise, and see them disappear through the very act of being openly discussed.

The intercultural city approach implies an assessment of the city's policies from the point of view of their impact on intercultural relations and the life conditions and prospects of the migrant and minority groups. Interculturality should trigger a change in the mindset of policy-makers and administrative officers, public service managers and practitioners. It often means public institutions stepping back, renouncing design solutions "for" migrants and minorities, and instead listening to their stories, mobilising their talents and empowering them to find solutions themselves.

Interculturality also means asking, 'If our aim were to create a society that were not only free, egalitarian and harmonious but also one in which there was productive interaction and co-operation between ethnicities, what would we need to do more of, or do differently?' What changes or new institutions, networks and physical infrastructure would it suggest? In the context of Intercultural Cities, this is known as looking at the city afresh 'through an intercultural lens'.

The Intercultural City model is raising a lot of interest in Europe and world-wide. In order to give other cities the chance to get acquainted with it, we will enlarge the network from 2011 and are also actively supporting the establishment of national intercultural cities networks. We are also developing new partnerships in order to increase the knowledge base of the programme and gather more evidence about the diversity advantage. We certainly hope that intercultural integration will generate a strong movement of cities, well beyond Europe's borders.