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# Who is afraid of diversity? From threats to benefits: lessons from the European programme of Intercultural Cities

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## Who is afraid of diversity?

### From threat to benefit: lessons from the Intercultural Cities programme

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*Diversity is the one true thing we all have in common. Celebrate it every day*

***Anonymous***

In a speech to the European Parliament on 29 January 2004 Secretary-General of the UN Kofi Annan stated that “there can be no doubt that European societies need immigrants. Europeans are living longer and having fewer children. Without immigration, the population of the soon-to-be twenty-five Member States of the EU will drop, from about 450 million now to under 400 million in 2050”. ILO projects that the decline in the native-born workforce could lead, in the same period, to a reduction in European per capita incomes by over 25 per cent.

Population movements and interactions have shaped the cultural landscapes in Europe throughout its entire history. However, nation-building efforts and emigration spells have induced a degree of amnesia about foreign inputs into the genetic fund of European countries and have nourished myths of cultural uniformity.

The myth of the cultural uniformity entertained by some European nations is being pressured both by the weakening of dominant religion and the nation-state, and by the large-scale migration which is a relatively recent phenomenon in modern Europe. Mass migration puts to a test societies’ real capacity to accommodate large numbers of newcomers, but also their ability to deal with the challenge of diversity to public imagination and identity.

The ability the labour market, the educational and health systems, the welfare institutions, the housing park, etc., (we call these infrastructures “integration hardware”) to deal with large-scale migration has been the object of many research and policy initiatives. Responses to the identity concerns to receiving communities have been addressed and understood to a much more limited extent. It seems obvious, however, that the “integration hardware” cannot work optimally without an adequate “software”: technical solutions can satisfy people’s primary needs but can only go so far in (re)-creating or enhancing the links which make the fabric of a human community and ensure cohesion and social peace. It also seems obvious that without a degree of cultural sensitivity and adaptation, the key institutions of societies will not function properly in societies which are radically diversifying.

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The challenge is therefore one of scale and time: migration into Europe, as a long-term trend, is likely to accelerate (despite temporary fluctuations due to the economic cycles). Unless European societies find the adequate catalysts to increase their adaptation capacity, both in terms of integration hardware, and the integration software, the future may see an increase of social unrest and much of the economic and cultural potential of diversity will remain unrealised.

The challenge of migrant and minority integration has been on the agenda of the Council of Europe for decades. Europe's oldest and largest intergovernmental organisation, the Council acts as a human rights watchdog and a laboratory for policy change. One of its most important recent achievements is the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue.

The White Paper puts forward a set of principles for the management conflicts that often accompany the encounters of diverse populations. The strength of the White paper comes from two main sources: first, it is grounded on the solid foundation of international legal standards such as the European convention of Human Rights, instruments related to minority rights, or the Faro Convention which upholds the value of a diverse cultural heritage for modern society, as well as the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. At the same time, the White paper is the result of a massive consultation with public and civil society stakeholders in all of the Council of Europe 47 member states.

The principles laid out in the White Paper on Intercultural are coming alive through various projects and initiatives, including the Intercultural cities programme.

## Interculturalism is about explicitly recognising the value of diversity while doing everything possible to increase interaction, mixing and hybridisation between cultural communities.

The purpose of the “Intercultural Cities” programme<sup>1</sup> – a joint action of the Council of Europe and the Europe Commission<sup>2</sup>, is to propose practical tools and approaches for managing the challenge of diversity at the local level. Its underlying philosophy has been inspired by the Council of Europe's long-standing work and standards in the fields of human rights, democratic governance, minority rights and intercultural dialogue<sup>3</sup>, and its methodology draws mainly from the research on a wide range of cities in Europe and beyond carried out by Comedia<sup>4</sup>. The key message of the programme is that diversity can be a resource for the development of the city, if the public discourse, the city institutions and processes and the behaviour of people take diversity positively into account. In other words, rather than ignoring diversity (as with guest-worker approaches), denying diversity (as with assimilationist approaches), or overemphasising diversity and thereby reinforcing walls between culturally distinct groups (as with multiculturalism), interculturalism is about explicitly recognising the value of diversity while doing everything possible to increase interaction, mixing and hybridisation between cultural communities.

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1 [www.coe.int/interculturalcities](http://www.coe.int/interculturalcities)

2 The programme is also supported by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe as well as a range of city networks, including Eurocities, Les rencontres and United Cities and Local Governments – Culture.

3 The list is long but particularly relevant are the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages (1992), the Framework convention on the protection of national minorities (1995), the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level (1992), the White paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008).

4 A range of publications have resulted from this extensive research, the most comprehensive being Phil Wood and Charles Landry, *The Intercultural City, Planning for Diversity Advantage*, Earthscan Ltd, 2007

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The Intercultural Cities programme involves a network of pilot cities<sup>5</sup> engaged in review and adaptation of their governance models and policies to the needs of a diversified community by translating the concept of interculturality, which has often in the past remained a figure of rhetoric, into specific governance and policy principles and actions. Assistance with policy analysis and intercultural strategy development, city-to-city learning and mentoring, and thematic exchanges, are the main methodological tools of the programme.

## Assistance with policy analysis and intercultural strategy development, city-to-city learning and mentoring, and thematic exchanges, are the main methodological tools of the programme.

Cities are the main protagonists of the programme for a range of reasons: most migrants live in cities; cities have capacity for autonomous action as well as the potential to develop a distinct community identity, a “soul” which reflects the level of integration or – in some cases – more suffering – of the community. It is relatively easier to develop a pluralistic identity at the level of the city than at national level. Cities can thus be seen as laboratories for the development of new models for diversity management, models where the “glue of community cohesion” is not based on a common origin, religion, language or history, but on the acceptance of common civic values.

The Intercultural cities programme has been inspired to a great extent by Agenda 21 for Culture and its emphasis on the importance of culture for the management of social change. Art and culture have always been catalysts of social and political transitions but the scale and urgency of change required by today’s environmental and migratory challenges imposes a new, even more crucial and dynamic role of the cultural sphere to help emerge a new paradigm of political thinking and action. Interculturalism is one name for this new paradigm.

In the spirit of Agenda 21 for culture, Intercultural cities’ point of departure is that local policies must be culturally sensitive or “literate” and that cultural planning must not be a niche activity confined to a few specialists, but must penetrate all areas of public policy. Intercultural cities share with Agenda 21 for culture a strategic approach to building a vision of the city as a cultural community, not simply as a physical, economic and political space. Another common feature of the two actions is the strong commitment to participatory governance as a key to managing diverse societies.

The key motivation for cities to develop positive diversity management strategies resides both in the failure of previous models to foster social cohesion and harness the positive potential of diversity, and the understanding that the current scale of migration requires qualitatively new approaches.

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<sup>5</sup> Berlin Neukölln (Germany), Izhevsk (Russian Federation), Lublin (Poland), Lyon (France), Melitopol (Ukraine), Neuchâtel (Switzerland), Oslo (Norway), Patras (Greece), Reggio Emilia (Italy), Subotica (Serbia), Tilburg (the Netherlands)

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## Interculturality?

Multiculturalism has replaced, in the past couple of decades, guest-worker and assimilationist integration models in most European countries. It has successfully imposed a rights-based, non-discrimination agenda and commanded “tolerance” and “respect” for cultural difference.

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 ghettoisation – 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. The development of a cultural sensitivity, the encouragement of intercultural interaction and mixing is seen not as the responsibility of a special department or officer but as an essential aspect of the functioning of all city departments and services.

It would be a mistake to present interculturality as a new magic wand to deal with integrating communities facing large-scale immigration. Interculturalism is not about rejecting everything done in the past – for instance the rights-based approach and respect for the other in multicultural models is essential - but is another important step in the continuum of integration and city-buidling. For instance, protecting and reinforcing the separate identity of new arrivals to a city could be an important first step in enabling them to engage with rather than feeling threatened by the host 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 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.

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# Building blocks of an intercultural city strategy

It would be naïve to pretend that it is possible to construct an intercultural strategy by using pre-fabricated elements. For the sake of analysis, learning and communication, however, we have chosen to identify, on the basis of proven “workable” approaches in real cities, the building blocks of a successful intercultural strategy.

## LEADERSHIP AND DISCOURSE

The first and possibly most important of these blocks is leadership. Probably all studies and texts on city-building have come up with a similar conclusion and its validity is difficult to contest.

City leaders are often squeezed between the need to manage diversity and encourage it as a part of the city development strategy, and the quiet hostility of voters to migrants and foreigners, fuelled by a certain type of political and media discourses.

### The intercultural city cannot emerge without a leadership which explicitly embraces the value of diversity.

The intercultural city cannot emerge without a leadership which explicitly embraces the value of diversity while upholding the values and constitutional principles of European society. It takes political courage to confront voters with their fears and prejudice, allow for these concerns to be addressed in the public debate, and invest taxpayer money in initiatives and services which promote intercultural integration. Such an approach is politically risky but then leadership is about leading, not simply about vote-counting. The public statements of the Mayor of Reggio Emilia 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”.

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## GOVERNANCE, CITIZENSHIP AND RIGHTS

The intercultural city cannot function without a clear framework of values and rights based on the European principles and standards of democracy and human rights. Cities are often confronted with the contradiction of having to build cohesive communities in which some people who have more limited social and political rights than others. They are sometimes also confronted with cases when citizens seek to justify “culturally” acts of violations of other people’s dignity and rights. It is absolutely essential that all those involved in the frontline mediation on cultural matters between groups of citizens and institutions, have a strong understanding of the imperatives of a rights-based approach to diversity management.

While not all cities have the heritage of places like the Canton of Neuchâtel where the right of foreigners to vote in local elections has been granted since the 1860s, many are experimenting with alternative forms of political inclusion such as advisory councils of foreign residents, shadow or observer councillors elected among non-national residents, neighbourhood councils open to all (and even sometimes drawn by lot), etc.

One lesson from the 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 models involve a people-centred approach which links, in a complex system of coordination, social and administrative services which work on migrant integration. They require a strong awareness of the diversity of situations, beliefs and needs of the members of these communities and seek to consult on a broad basis. Intercultural governance implies reinforcing the position of civil society in a particular way – rather than legitimating “ethnic community representatives” which are often advocates of cultural “purity”, it encourages the expression of plural voices in each community and cross-cultural activities of non-for profit organisations.

Finally, intercultural governance often requires the creation of specialised mediation institutions to manage cultural conflict. For instance Torino 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 (or House of Conflicts) which are staffed by skilled mediators plus volunteers. A further step is the negotiation of ‘neighbourhood contracts’.

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## ADDRESSING IDENTITY

An intercultural community cannot be sustainable if fundamental issues of identity, intercultural and inter-religious conflict are not dealt with openly in the media sphere and the public debate in an effort to encourage the emergence of a pluralistic identity of the urban community, or in Putnam's terms, a "broader sense of we" which includes all communities living in an urban territory.

The Intercultural city programme has revealed the crucial importance of addressing explicitly identity fears in the community. Extensive campaigns such as the ones organised regularly in Neuchâtel involving citizens, artists, universities, organisations, public authorities focusing explicitly in the changes of the city ethnoscape and lifestyles and helping people to voice their concerns are a powerful way to deal with "identity stress".

But identity fears can also be addressed on an every-day level too, as in the small city of Vic (Catalonia, 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.

## CITY POLICIES THROUGH THE INTERCULTURAL LENS

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 and often means public institutions stepping back, renouncing to design solutions "for" migrants and minorities but listening to their stories and mobilising their talents and empower them to find solutions themselves.

Interculturality also means asking 'If our aim is to create a society which was 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 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 or looking at the city afresh 'through an intercultural lens'.

Below as just a few examples intercultural approaches in some policy domains. Many more are available on the intercultural cities web site.

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In education, it is important to establish a few schools and colleges as intercultural flagships, with high investment in staff training, intercultural curriculum, co-operative learning models, closer links with parents and community, twinning links with mono-cultural schools or even shared facilities (as in Tilburg where a Catholic and a Muslim school are creating a joint campus). In some cases the compulsory enrolling of newly arrived migrant kids in designated schools may be necessary in order to ensure an optimal mixing of children by ethnic background.

It is also important to adapt pedagogical methods to pupils' family culture backgrounds ("collectivist" cultures in Hofstede's term privilege group learning, rewards for group, not individual success, and a more authoritative, directive role of the teacher). Appointing intercultural mediators in multicultural schools or training some of the staff in intercultural mediation can also be a part of the strategy.

In the public realm, cities should identify a number of key public spaces (formal and informal) and invest in discrete redesign, animation and maintenance to raise levels of usage and interaction by all ethnic groups; develop a better understanding of how different groups use space and incorporate into planning and design guidelines.

In housing, programmes could seek to give ethnic groups confidence and information enabling them to consider taking housing opportunities outside traditional enclaves.

In neighbourhoods, it is useful to designate key facilities as intercultural community centres, containing key services such as health, maternity, childcare and libraries and encourage, including through fiscal measures or the provision of community facilities, the setting up and action of culturally mixed community groups and organisations acting as catalysts of neighbourhood activities and mediators. Small-scale initiatives that enable migrants to act as a link between individuals or families and the services should also be encouraged.

## A STRATEGIC APPROACH

The genuine intercultural city cannot emerge from disconnected initiatives or small-scale policy changes. It can only be the result of a shared vision and concerted efforts of a range of institutional and civil society stakeholders. The case of Barcelona whose first intercultural action plan was supported by all political parties, but a city intercultural project will not be sustainable if it is supported by only a part of the political spectrum.

Intercultural city strategies cannot be limited to incremental approaches that build solely on what has gone before (though obvious city strengths and good practice will need to be built on). They need to be transformative; aiming to fundamentally change civic culture, the public sphere and institutions themselves. What is being sought here is a qualitative change in relationships; between authorities, institutions, people and groups.

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But most importantly, intercultural city strategies should be not bureaucratic documents but living agreements and coalitions of multiple actors, reflecting, as the Mayor of Tilburg Ruud Vreeman “the DNA of the city and not ready-made models” and inspired, as they do it in Lublin, by the history of the city, where the city’s intercultural aspiration builds on the memory of past periods of prosperity brought by cross-cultural exchanges.

One year only after the launch of the programme the force of the intercultural cities approach has been acknowledged by many city networks and by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. It is already inspiring a global coalition of partners, including United Cities and Local Governments which will bring the intercultural approach to diversity management to many more cities across the world.

- The article and the full report are available on-line at <http://www.cities-localgovernments.org> and <http://www.agenda21culture.net>. They can be reproduced for free as long as UCLG and Barcelona City Council are cited as sources.
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