The intercultural integration approach: cities realising the diversity advantage

The Council of Europe, together with a group of pioneer cities, launched in 2008 an ambitious initiative to develop an approach to integrating diverse communities which addresses the cohesion deficit and charts a new way ahead: the Intercultural cities initiative.

Diversity advantage

At the heart of this approach lies the concept of DIVERSITY ADVANTAGE[1]. What does it stand for?

- Diversity is not a threat – it can be an asset for communities if managed in a positive and competent way
- Embracing diversity is not a gimmick for city branding but a philosophy of governance and policy-making
- Urban institutions and officials need a degree of cultural competence to be able to mange the profound changes and conflict related to diversity.

We have carried out a very extensive analysis of social and economic research[2] and have found convincing evidence that diversity and intercultural interaction can improve productivity and wages and increase entrepreneurship and foreign trade. The same kinds of benefits apply to cities. Both research and practice suggest that cities can gain enormously from the diversified skills, entrepreneurship and creativity associated with diversity, provided they facilitate intercultural interaction and co-creation.

According to social theory intercultural contact favours trust and solidarity, spatial segregation of diversity is responsible for the lower bonding and bridging capital.

Positive interaction matters

The key to realising the diversity advantage is positive interaction. Current integration models fall short of this requirement. Assimilation rejects diversity; multiculturalism underestimates the importance of cross-cultural interaction.

Urban policies and practice should promote encounters and help local groups organise around other-than-ethnic axes of difference – and this is best achieved at local, even neighbourhood level. Encounters do not need to be formal; they can happen in environments such as social centres, libraries, sports, schools, cafes, squares and all sorts of urban spaces. Again, research shows that local systems that facilitate encounters and interaction result in higher level of identification, participation and solidarity in the local community, across cultural and ethnic boundaries.

[1] The concept of diversity advantage has been introduced and studies by the UK thinktank Comedia
[2] https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/sso/SSODisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680492f80

Identity matters

One of human beings' most important needs is the need to belong and the need for identity. Assimilation models overemphasise host country identity as fixed, passed unchanged across generations. Multicultural models also view identity as fixed and unchangeable, but it focuses on group identity, neglecting the identity needs of the entire community.

We need to broaden out identity, to achieve, as Putnam says, a broader sense of "we" including all people with whom we share a territory and the quality of being human regardless of language, origin, faith and other differences.

In practical terms this means to recognise the importance of different cultures and their right to participate in the building of a common identity which is defined by diversity, pluralism and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The recognition of diverse cultures involves openly embracing diversity in official discourse and communication, but also adapting institutions to diverse participants and users, making sure that they are open and flexible enough to innovate on the basis of inputs of different cultural origins.

Governance matters

Successful integration means inclusion not only in economic, social and cultural life but first and foremost power sharing: access for migrants and foreign residents to political rights.

The academic literature points at the need to adapt representative democracy to the multiplicity and complexity of identities in diverse societies. This can be achieved through more open and participatory democratic institutions and processes that allow civil society organisations and grassroots movements representing specific legitimate interests to have a voice in decision-making and the management of public affairs. The challenge is to define ways of legitimising such actors and the forms of governance which are able to empower citizens without threatening democracy and fundamental rights and freedoms. The city appears to be the best suited laboratory to explore and test new forms of participatory and inclusive democracy.

Cultural competence matters

The diversity advantage is not automatic. Many countries and cities across Europe – and elsewhere have failed to reap the benefits of diversity and even face conflicts and disintegration because of inadequate integration policies. To a large extent, this inadequacy is due to an underestimation of the cultural dimension of integration – a simplistic or biased understanding of culture and diversity, a rather mechanistic approach to integration leading to the marginalisation of migrant cultures and the related perpetuation of poverty, exclusion and conflict.

The need for a strategic approach

To be successful, an integration model needs to work on a strategic level. Integration is not the job of one department of service but a key objective for all services and institutions. At the urban level, such a strategic approach can be achieved by mobilising actors across administrative silos and professional specialisms and involving broadly civil society for a common vision of an inclusive integration and city-making. The strategy needs to cover all policy areas and engage institutions and citizens towards common objectives under strong political leadership.

The intercultural integration model

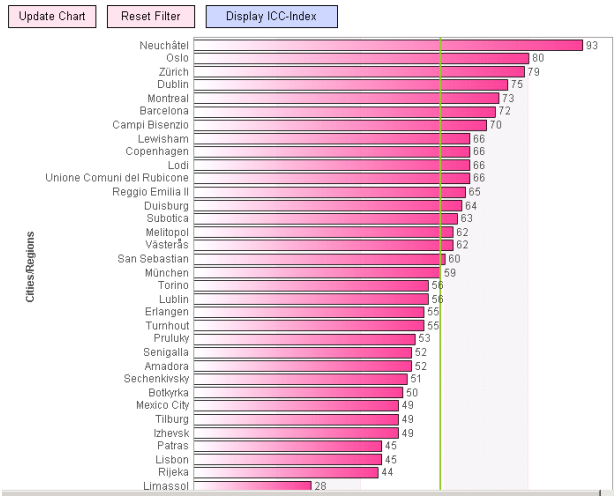
All of the above points represent defining features of the intercultural integration model resulting from an extensive analysis of city practice and relevant international standards. Over 60 cities across Europe are currently applying the model (members of the European network, as well as members of the national networks), as well as Mexico, Montréal and cities in Japan and South Korea. The model views integration not as dealing with people with needs that have to be helped to function adequately but as a process whereby social and economic institutions are able to identify, enhance and harness the skills and talents of all and empower them to become productive members of society. To achieve this,

- Integration needs to be conceived as a way of achieving the diversity advantage and outlines the conditions which need to be satisfied
- Public policies and institutions that are culturally competent and foster intercultural interaction,
- The building of a pluralistic and inclusive identity,
- A participatory and inclusive governance system,
- A comprehensive and strategic approach driven by committed leadership

The Intercultural cities toolbox

Intercultural integration is a holistic, cross-policy, joint-up approach open for broad input from practitioners and citizens. This approach is realised through the development of comprehensive intercultural urban strategies. 24 cities have already developed intercultural strategies, including capital cities such as Copenhagen, Oslo, and Mexico city.

In order to support the process of strategy development, implementation and evaluation, Intercultural cities proposes a set of tools and processes. Extensive city profiles, hundreds of practice examples, a step-by-step guide and thematic papers on the intercultural approach in specific policy areas These tools enable a structured approach to policy audit, citizen involvement in strategy development, and offer hundreds of good practice examples as well as guidelines for citizen participation in the strategy development process.



An Intercultural Cities Index has been developed based on the elements of the intercultural integration approach. The purpose of the Index is to track cities' performance in relation to intercultural integration. The results of the INDEX help cities make evidence-based judgments about the impact and outcomes of their policies and resource investment. As of today, 55 cities in the world have been evaluated using this Index. Managers of the evaluated cities were then provided with specific policy advice and recommendations in the variety of policy areas, particularly those where additional improvements are needed.[3]

Study visits and thematic events expose a range of policy-makers, practitioners and advocates from each city to practice exchange, reflections and discussions with fellow actors from other cities. The events use an interactive, hand-on format designed to bring energy and ideas into the strategy-making process and help build a stakeholder alliance.

The Intercultural cities learning community provides practical help to policy-makers wishing to

- connect and focus the efforts of city departments and services towards clearly defined and shared goals
- engage positively with citizens
- identify and empower intercultural innovators and bridge-builders
- build a vision for the diversity future of the city and translate it into a workable strategy
- benefit from the advise and support of peers from other cities
- require expertise targeted to the city's specific focus and needs
- an international and multidisciplinary community of constantly evolving practice.

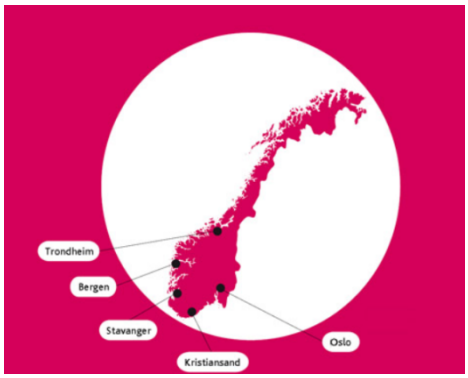
3 Please see www.coe.int/interculturalcities for details on the Intercultural Cities Index. Khovanova-Rubicondo (2009) offers an intermediate evaluation of the programme and an application of the Intercultural cities index.

5 national networks have been created in Europe – Italy, Spain, Ukraine, Norway and Portugal which increases outreach and impact. Mexico city and Montréal are also members and cities in USA, Korea and Japan are taking keen interest in the Intercultural integration approach.

European ICC network

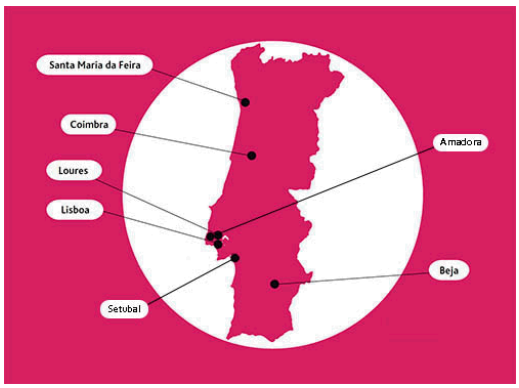
Spanish ICC network

Norwegian ICC network



Ukrainian ICC network

Portuguese ICC network



Italian ICC network

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For more information: www.coe.int/interculturalcities

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