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COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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Tackling Prejudice and Engaging with Religious Minorities
San Sebastián (Spain), 27 – 28 October 2016

Background Paper for Participants

Aim & Context of the Proposed Event

This event aims to explore local policy responses to tackling prejudice and discrimination against religious minorities through an intercultural approach, as well as by engaging positively with faith communities for building trust and cohesion within the city as a whole. The event will recognise and particularly respond to current concerns expressed by network members about rising levels of Islamophobia as well as stigmatisation of other religions across the Intercultural Cities Network, whilst acknowledging the rights of all individuals and groups - whether religious or not - under the European Convention on Human Rights. These current concerns about rising levels of Islamophobia are arising in a context where in Europe as a whole Muslims are the largest religious minority (after the majority Christian or non-religiously-affiliated groups), and this population is growing.[1] Policies and public discourse at local, national and international levels of government can have a significant impact on prejudice and discrimination against particular religious groups. This can include impacts in ways that can help promote positive interactions between individuals and groups and provide legislative protections against discrimination. However, they may also include aspects of policies at local, national and international levels that are seen as exacerbating tensions between groups. Some policies may themselves be critiqued as systemically discriminatory (or in effect discriminatory and supporting prejudice) towards particular groups. This can be highly controversial and frequently politicised territory for policymakers and individuals, groups and organisations in civil society, for a wide range of reasons that the event will explore, drawing on a variety of related expertise and research.

The event fits within a broader programme of activities by local government in San Sebastián which is focused on tackling fears and prejudices associated with religious minorities to bring diverse

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[1] For example, estimates by the Pew Research Center (2015:161) put the Muslim population in Europe in 2010 at 43.47million (5.9% of the population), following those affiliating as Christians at 553.28million (74.5%) and unaffiliated population at 139.89million (18.8%). These are all much larger than other religious groups such as Jews at 1.42million (0.2%), Hindus (0.2%), Buddhists at 1.35million (0.2%), folk religions (0.87million, 0.1%) and other religions (0.87million, 0.1%) respectively.   The same report from the Pew Research Center also predicts that the Muslim population in Europe will grow significantly, estimating this to be 10% of Europe's population by 2050 (p.161). However, the issue of measuring religion in populations (and predicting changes and trends) is well recognised as a difficult one, not least because of differences in data collection methods, measures and sources, and frequent differences between nominal affiliation and various forms of belief and practice, for example. See: Pew Research Center (2015) *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*, Washington: Pew Research Center. (Related summaries and data available at: http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/).

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communities together through greater interaction. It also builds on previous engagement by the Intercultural Cities Network in exploring issues relating to 'Faith in Intercultural Cities' more widely. This has included an event and report exploring related challenges and dilemmas in London in 2014[2] and a workshop on interfaith dialogue at the Intercultural Cities Milestone Event in Dublin in 2013.

Proposed Outline Structure of the Event

The event will bring together theoretical expertise and practical experience in responding creatively to prejudice and discrimination using an intercultural cities approach in an interactive way. The event is expected to follow a three part structure in which each part would build incrementally to share and develop perspectives and creative responses together:

1.   *Understanding causes and effects:*

   (a) What do participants think is causing prejudice and discrimination against religious minorities in general (and Islamophobia in particular)?
   (b) What do we know from research concerning the dynamics of prejudice against religious groups in general, and Islamophobia in particular?
   (c) What are the effects of prejudice and discrimination on religious minorities and on other groups, as well as on the civic environment and wider interactions in local society?
   (d) What differences exist between how different religious groups are treated, and what factors contribute to these differences?

2.   *Existing responses:*

   (a) What are participants doing (if anything) in response to these issues in their context, and what has been their experience from this? What do they see as working/not working, and how are their initiatives interacting with other policy initiatives, local and national?
   (b) What do we know from research about the impact of existing responses, including what is effective in preventing and tackling prejudice and discrimination against religious minorities in general, and Islamophobia in particular?

   This will move on to include a consideration of strengths, issues and limitations with these responses in a comparative context, including any differences between the responses and results of initiatives undertaken in relation to different religious groups.

3.   *Thinking creatively together:*

   What new/better responses could be made, taking into account the learning from the above discussions?

All forums for discussion and contributions by different participants during the event will be structured to encourage positive dialogue between those who participated, underpinned by the

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[2] For a report on this event which includes a brief summary of the Council of Europe's positions on related matters, see Orton, A. (2014) *Faith in Intercultural Cities: Recognising religions as part of local diversity, and exploring how they can contribute to the diversity advantage of cities*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

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Council of Europe's founding principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This will include recognition of any underlying fears and dilemmas that may affect public bodies, religious and other groups as they engage in these issues, as well as any political manipulation of these that is affecting local efforts.