



COUNCIL OF EUROPE EXCHANGE ON THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE - EURODIACONIA WRITTEN INPUT ON SUB THEME I: FROM RECEPTION TO INTEGRATION: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS GROUPS.

September 2017

Eurodiaconia is a network of over 45 organisations in 32 countries in Europe, founded in the Christian faith and working in the tradition of diaconia. Representing over 30.000 local organisations, Eurodiaconia members provide social and healthcare services to thousands of people across Europe and promote social justice.

Eurodiaconia members are engaged in all facets of migrants' integration, ranging from emergency aid (e.g. housing, health, food) to provide support for education, training, access to the labour market and social participation. Based on the experiences and activities of its members, Eurodiaconia provides targeted policy recommendations towards more effective policy action. Eurodiaconia believes in the essential role of religious organisations in facilitating integration and inter-cultural dialogue for better social cohesion.

1. Diaconia, a support based on trust

Eurodiaconia members report that vulnerable migrants have often said they turned to their services because of Eurodiaconia's members' identity and faith based approach. Vulnerable migrants have reported they are more open to trust, and therefore to seek support from, a church related organisation rather than a governmental body. They report they feel safer and are less reluctant to speak about their experiences and needs openly with faith-based organisations. For them, faith-based organisations can often be perceived as particularly secure and familiar environments.

2. Diaconia, reaching out for social inclusion

Eurodiaconia members, thanks to their faith based identity, might also be particularly able to respond in a cultural sensitive way. Eurodiaconia's member in Norway, the Church City Mission, reported being able to reach out to some refugees' families who refused "mental health" support as it was culturally stigmatised as madness or spiritual. The Church City Mission was able to mediate and provide mental health support. There, the faith-based identity of Eurodiaconia members is a key to reach out to vulnerable refugees and their children, to work for social inclusion.

3. Diaconia, a space for community building

Some European societies may be less interested in using religion as a tool to bridge cultural gaps, regarding religion as a private matter. Similarly, not all migrants might be interested in discussing their religious views and values. However, encounters between different religious groups need not to be reduced to a dialogue about religious traditions, but can also address other topics of common interest. For example, in Serbia, Eurodiaconia member the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation works with war veterans from Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia Hercegovina, on trust and reconciliation. They share a need to reflect on their experiences and to overcome the traumas of war. In France, it was recognised that bringing persons from different religious backgrounds together to share food is easier than encouraging them to discuss religious commonalities and differences. Diaconal Organisations have here the advantage of having already a pre-existing network, a community to rely on, through parishes, churches etc.

Conclusion

The recent increase in far-right radicalisation in Europe has impacted the traditional narrative on migration, portraying it as a threat to societal stability as well as European identity. As Eurodiaconia stated in its joint

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response to the European Commission Action Plan for the integration of Third Country nationals¹, migrants with a Muslim background might at the moment be more at risk of facing stigmatisation and xenophobia. While we welcome the mentions of the importance of interreligious dialogue to promote community cohesion, as faith-based organisations² we believe it has not yet been appropriately valued as an instrument of cohesion. Eurodiaconia calls on the Governments in Europe to promote a more ambitious and comprehensive approach to inter-faith dialogue by:

- Recognising the specific role of churches and faith-based organisations in reinforcing social cohesion. Religion ought not to be perceived only as problem, but as part of the solution.
- Actively involving churches, mosques and other faith-based actors initiatives for integration to ensure better stakeholder coordination, greater participation, and to counteract radicalisation.
- Facilitate the exchange of best practices to include interreligious and intercultural dialogue, religious literacy programmes to combat stereotypes and wrong perceptions. Recognise that inside communities diverse faiths encounter and mutual learning is facilitated, enhancing civic participation of newcomers.³

A good practice example from Eurodiaconia's member the Church of Sweden

In 2015, about 163 000 new migrants arrived in Sweden, most of them coming from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria and Iraq. Many migrants and refugees end up in isolated locations with little support towards societal participation. This is where the Church of Sweden comes in.

Since 2007, the Church of Sweden has placed a strong emphasis on facilitating effective integration. To achieve this, it is actively cooperating with other faith-based actors such as the Muslim Association of Sweden, Stockholm City mission and the Catholic diocese of Stockholm. In 2008, this cooperation resulted in the creation of the "Kallan" ("the source") inter-faith information centre, which offers its services free of charge, to all people, regardless of their cultural or religious background. The staff itself also has different geographical and religious backgrounds.

The 'Kallan' Centre provide a wide range of services. It can link visitors to a lawyer specialised in migration issues and organises Swedish classes, based on the recognition of language as a key driver of integration. Many women coming to the centre struggle with low self-esteem, so the center aims to empower them through language and cooking courses and provides the opportunity to work in a restaurant on site. Twelve people have found employment following this programme. The center also organises health groups, groups for seniors and art therapy sessions for emotional expression beyond the realm of words. Individual support is offered regarding the translation of documents and communication with doctors, lawyers and public bodies.

One of the Centre's key objectives is to show that religion can support, rather than hinder, integration. Imam Awad, who is involved in the coordination of the Centre's activities, speaks of the several ways of understanding religion and emphasised the commonalities between different religions, as well as the importance of engaging in dialogue and strengthening mutual understanding. Once per week, the Kallan centre organises an 'interfaith service', allowing Muslims and Christians to pray together. It is not aimed at mixing traditions but at underlining mutual friendship and solidarity. Whilst some Muslim associations reject the approach, the government and secular partners support the initiative.

¹ "Christian group on Migration" comments on the EU Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals, November 2016

² Caritas Europa, CCME - Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, COMECE - Commission of the Bishop's Conferences of the European Community (Secretariat), Don Bosco International, European Federation of the Community of Sant'Egidio, Eurodiaconia, ICMC – International Catholic Migration Commission, JRS-Europe – Jesuit Refugee Service Europe, Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), QCEA – Quaker Council for European Affairs

³ More background information is available, e.g. EU funded research project POLITIS civic participation of new citizens 2004-2007, <http://www.politis-europe.uni-oldenburg.de>, EU-co-funded project MIRACLE – Models of Integration through Religion, Activation, Cultural Learning and Exchange, 2009 <http://www.ccme.be/areas-of-work/uniting-in-diversity/miracle/-2010>