Developing Community Cohesion in the UK – Briefing Note

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Community Cohesion developed in the UK from 2001. This followed a review into the race riots in English Northern towns in the same year. This review found that the White British majority community and the Asian minority communities were living in 'parallel lives' in some areas. Consequently, there was little knowledge or understanding of the other community and trust and tolerance was very low. Tensions were never far beneath the surface.

Community Cohesion was based on four principles

The first of these was borrowed from the previous 'multicultural' policies:

> Those from different backgrounds should have similar life opportunities;

The remaining three were quite new to UK policy:

> There should be a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
> The diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances should be appreciated and positively valued;
> Strong and positive relationships should be developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

This new approach meant that, firstly, programmes had to be devised to promote interaction between a range of groups to dispel prejudices and undermine stereotypes. Intercultural contact could no longer be left to chance and institutional barriers had to be removed.

What is also notable is that

- community cohesion programmes had to engage the <u>majority</u> community - for the first time programmes were no longer simply focused on minorities.
- Though it began on the basis of improving relations between different ethnic and faith groups, it was soon used to change perceptions of all other areas of difference – for example, intergenerational, disabilities, gender, social class, sexual orientation.
- It was also locally focused, tackling the differences and tensions that were evident in each particular area and making the interventions relevant to them

A variety of agencies implemented the community cohesion programme. These included:

- Specially created voluntary sector bodies, funded by government or by philanthropists
- Local government and other statutory bodies, such as the police, health service and social housing agencies – but these were not special programmes, they were to be built into their everyday, or 'mainstream' services.
- Schools – they were a key focus, for both the students and their families

- The private sector – a number of employers established cross-cultural programmes and developed mixed teams for the first time (also helping the equality programme)
- Faith groups worked with their members and developed inter-faith initiatives

But secondly, the programmes were much more than promoting interaction.

They had to create a sense of belonging by developing a positive story for all groups and promoting a series of new images of diversity right across the community. Campaigns like 'One Leicester' were championed in most cities. These were also presented through the press and media and many attempts were made to rebut negative stories about minorities, even to the extent of using 'myth-busting' programmes. And they also continued with positive action to tackle inequalities

There was some resistance at first - people were understandably apprehensive about getting out of their comfort zones. This was soon overcome with the emphasis on enjoyable and challenging activities, for example by using the performing arts and by bringing people together around a common cause and creating local pride.

Community and faith leaders also sometimes felt that their control was being undermined as attitudes and behaviours were now individualised rather than mediated through them. And this proved to be the case with less financial support being channelled through single identity groups.

Some academics also thought it was an attempt to deny difference and promote assimilation, and were initially protective of singular and 'essentialised' identities, seeing the creation of more complex multi-layered differences and commonalities as a threat.

But the results were very encouraging - surveys demonstrated that attitudes were becoming more positive about diversity and research based evaluations showed that intercultural contact did in fact reduce prejudice and intolerance. In wider policy terms, an intercultural policy narrative began to emerge to support community cohesion and to challenge the previous multicultural approach.

However, the new 'extremism' agenda, developing from about 2007and initially in parallel with community cohesion, gradually became a very dominant and singular policy objective.

Community cohesion programmes have been adopted in a number of other countries. In the UK, they are still undertaken by local government and voluntary agencies and are promoted by the Welsh and Northern Irish governments, but the focus in England and to some extent in Scotland has shifted to tackling extremist views. These are largely seen to revolve around the Muslim communities but some initiatives are focused on the Far Right. The UK's *Prevent* programme has also become almost entirely concentrated on attempting to stop young people becoming radicalised. However, some of the community cohesion techniques have been adopted for this agenda and there are a now signs that various integration and cohesion measures are about to be re-launched.

For more information on community cohesion and interculturalism go to www.icocofoundation.com

Ted Cantle is the author of *Community Cohesion: A New Framework for Race and Diversity* (2008) and *Interculturalism: The New Era of Cohesion and Diversity* (2012) both published by Palgrave