



INTERCULTURAL CITIES POLICY BRIEFS

Political communication and intercultural messaging in times of crisis

Migration and diversity are now central components of the public debate in Europe on issues of culture, social cohesion and identity. They stir emotion, inflame opinion and attract political controversy with equal measure. The polarization of the debate around diversity may foster xenophobic political discourse and movements, raising concern about the survival of the values of human rights, respect and inclusion which have been Europe's brand in the second half of the past century.

In order to make diversity an asset, rather than a threat to European societies, the Council of Europe has developed a new policy approach for the local level, which has proved being instrumental for achieving cohesion, equality and development in diverse societies. This model is called Intercultural integration and it is implemented through the Intercultural cities programme.

The [intercultural approach to diversity and inclusion](#) (including migrant integration) enables participating cities to reap the benefits and minimise the risks related to migration and cultural diversity. Its key elements are:

- Creating spaces and opportunities for deep interaction and co-creation between people of different cultural origins and backgrounds to build trust and realise the creative potential of diversity;
- Power sharing – involving people of diverse origins in decision-making in urban institutions - political, educational, social, economic, cultural;
- Fostering intercultural competence in public, private and civil society organisations;
- Embracing cultural pluralism and multiple identities through leadership discourse and urban pedagogy actions;
- Managing conflict positively, busting stereotypes and engaging in a debate about the impact and potential of diversity for local development;

Communicating the positive vision of intercultural cities requires a media skill-set that combines engaging, optimistic and timely messaging, with a strong understanding and command of data and research.

Focused communication of this type is even more crucial during a crisis, which can place city officials in the eye of a media and political storm, putting at risk years of community trust-building and solidarity.

What are the do's and don'ts of effective intercultural communication, especially in times of acute conflict & inter-community tension?

1. Treat communication as a component of the overall strategy for building a welcoming culture

In the long run, it is important to make the community resilient to crises – either home-grown or “imported” via media. Constant proactive messaging is needed for the receiving community to understand who the immigrants are and what benefits they bring in.

The first time when people start coming in large number communities often respond with fear. Strong political discourse can help transform communities from places of fear to tolerant and actively welcoming places. There is a tipping point where it becomes the cultural norm to be welcoming to immigrants.

How to tell a positive story about the changes which are happening in the community?

In the long run, it is important to build a strong knowledge basis for your intercultural communication work. Spread the knowledge about the actions, policies and good practice in cities, so that all officers know about them and not only the integration officer.

It is important also to build trust-based relationships with minority organisations and large networks, in order to know what is going on and have access to stories and sources for media. Enfranchising people, developing & showcasing their stories, and giving them a voice, must be a daily strategy. Don't just wait for crisis to happen to try and sort it out.

Work with legacy media but also use social media to offer lesser heard groups' stories. LGBT and other groups they have their own web pages but may not be reaching out beyond their own constituency. When you publicise their stories they will all share it and you will have a great audience, and some people will start emerging as stories which will also be caught by mainstream journalists.

Know your audience and focus on the 60% who are ambivalent about immigration & diversity. They may have concerns but could be brought to change their perspective about migrants from them being the other, to them being our neighbours and our colleagues. The discourse which can help bring this shift about should focus beyond charity for a few, on the hope, resilience and contribution of refugees & the value of diversity for everybody, and a sense of belonging for all.

[Welcoming America](#) is an USA-based organisation which leads a broad network of NGOs and local governments and supports them in developing plans, programs, and policies that transform their communities into vibrant places of respect for diversity & equity.

Welcoming America has developed tools and messages to help local governments to shape a discourse that takes into account who are the 60% and how they see the world, what appeals to them. Possible frames include:

- Strong together – using positive language to create energy and use words which evoke creativity, inclusion, togetherness;

- Contrast different histories people have but shared value and a shared future. Some people will be sensitive to messages which evoke patriotism and that migrants are here because they want to share their life with a strong and prosperous community.
- Focus on benefits for everybody, not only migrants. Use data to illustrate wider trends: positive messages can be met with negative reaction. For example, when global talent is evoked, some people feel they lose out from global competition. It is therefore speak in positive terms about migration and diversity's impact on everybody's jobs and use data about migrant entrepreneurship.
- Identify the common values that both immigrants and host communities have (eg attachment to family, hard work, hospitality, dynamism etc. These would be specific to communities: a common value for Tennessee is faith, in Michigan an economic message is used, saying that newcomers would revive the economy; Nebraska loves college football, Colorado is about being strong and independent – connect local values with migrants' values.
- Balance stories and facts in order to appeal both to rational and to emotional intelligence and memory. In the US discourse had focused too much about facts but people often do not believe facts because people on the opposite side also have facts. You need to connect with people's minds first with facts and then touch their hearts through stories of actual people. Local data eg. about the economic contribution of refugees to the community, is more powerful than national data.
- Communicate through credible spokespeople – eg. someone from the same faith background, or a business people.
- Stay positive, focus on solutions, message locally. Involve immigrants and refugees in communication.
- Do not restate myths. eg – it is not true that immigrants live from benefits. Avoid using dividing language, only focus on refugees who are deserving may somehow imply that other refugees and migrants are not deserving.
- Work in partnership – have a communications plan with different kinds of leaders to reinforce your message.
- Don't get stuck in a security frame, refer to people's lives and destinies whenever asked about violent news stories.

2. Intercultural messaging through media

When incidents such a terrorist strikes or violent crimes committed by migrants happen, media tend to tense the debate, giving voice to culture wars arguments, raising fears and xenophobic logic about the “dark side” of migration and its victims. Stereotypes about migrants as a poor underclass and myths about the migrants as sexual predators or Islam as a threat to European civilization are unfortunately rather common...

It takes a lot of skills and experience to communicate the intercultural & diversity advantage message in the midst of negative stories. Here are some useful tips:

- Be pragmatic but always refer to values. Be relaxed, do not put too much pressure into making everyone intercultural but allow them to choose their life and be happy.
- It is important practice a lot in order to make sure there is no hesitation, wrong wording or a weakness in your message. Start with a positive message and repeat it later, always repeat your key message several times. Focus on the entire community, on common values and win-win points. Do speak about your values, make them clear, spell them out (eg we all want strong communities, we all want our children to succeed in school...), speak up against divides and segregation;
- However, listen to what is actually being said by your opponents and address real challenges, or be accused of political engineering. Remember that opponents can use the argument that interculturalists are just out of touch.
- Analyse the problem without hiding it, but present solutions, and bring in human aspects; Use facts & data, do not repeat myths; do not say anything which can later prove to be a lie/wrong.
- Regardless of the questions or the journalist' attitude, remain positive, upbeat and confident. Keep it simple, use simple language. Find out what the journalist wants to speak about, do not do blind interviews;
- Whenever possible, take the issue out of the migration context: if you have exceptional treatment for migrant women (eg swimming pools), say that other groups – pensioners, local women etc. also have special hours and possibilities; refer to good, positive examples of minority success or exemplary behavior, they can be powerful;
- Do not make statements with caveats, because that can be used without the caveat as a sound-bite;
- Concede the argument a little bit, show you are reasonable and understand people's need and pain but you have a different approach and it is better;
- Consider the language you are using – terms like “crisis”, influx, and violence create negative emotions. Do not conform to stereotypes, equating black people and sport etc.
- Refugees, migrants must have agency, they are responsible adults, you cannot excuse any behavior because they have been victims in the past;
- If you want to make comparisons, compare with neighboring country, to somewhere that speaks to people;
- Involve migrants and refugees in planning, working and communication;
- Use a lot of messages and video, brand well, don't be boring and academic;
- Think about what is the story and identity of your city, and make sure everyone knows and tells it;
- Get to know the migrants in order to be convincing while telling their stories, and not to be artificial;
- Make sure you are diversity inclusive: ask immigrants to speak about business, art etc, normal topic and not only integration issues.

In Bergen (Norway) the Municipality engages the Muslim community in community relations & communication. For example, they are organising a course with the Mosques about prevention of extremism but also about the reality and perceptions of Islam. The media work around the course focuses on the fact that the Muslim parents are worried about their children going to fight ISIS. They address all kinds of prejudice – prejudice against Muslims but also the feeling among the Muslim community that they are victims of prejudice which shows is not true.

Also in Bergen they produced a video on family reunification for refugees. It was released in January 2016 when the public opinion was turning sour in the midst of the refugee crisis and showed the human side of the story. A lot of people shared the video on social media to show they support it.

In Botkyrka, Sweden, intercultural and communications training is offered to members of the municipality as well as political representatives. This is based on the belief that in order to change the image of Botkyrka in the media and public at large it is necessary to engage everyone in the municipality in thinking about the importance of messaging in promoting a positive image. This was crucial to challenging a negative perception of Botkyrka and bringing about positive change. The experience included challenging negative perceptions of migrants in the region following riots in 2013 by inviting reporters to come and meet with the residents of the area. The local community can also play an important role in challenging stereotypes and getting the population to think more about intercultural integration. This approach was especially evident when Botkyrka became the first region in Stockholm to institute a public call to prayer in response to the needs of the Muslim community. The approach, which garnered international media attention, demonstrated a consultative choice based on community engagement.

The municipal communication officers give to media the names of some citizens – an MP, a businessman, a parent, so that they don't only speak to politicians, so that they tell their story.

Lisbon has devoted an issue of the municipality magazine about stories of success of migrants

3. Manage the interview conditions

- You can tell journalists in advance that you do not want to speak about some topics, but you need to give a reason. If you are the spokesperson of an elected official, it is a hard to decline commenting on the hot issues of the day;
- Check interview locations. Don't accept interviews against the backdrop of compromising images or graffiti;
- Avoid live interviews where you can be led into giving answers you are not prepared to give;
- Journalists are often looking for the sensational quote, they can suggest things for you to repeat and then quote you. If you are interviewed, record what has been said, as it makes it difficult to misquote you;

- Build a relationship of trust with journalists: you can provide advertising revenue which you could withdraw; cultivate human relationships with the journalists so they do not haunt you. Give them a scoop from time to time.
- Do not be defensive and argumentative: journalists always win because they edit the final story. Remain always polite, calm, do not try to be too smart, clever and patronising;
- Use spokespeople who have credibility because they are for instance of minority background. They can deliver difficult messages because their background gives them credibility.