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Beyond Religious Differences

Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination based on religion or belief: consequences for young people and youth work responses

Baku, 5-8 November 2008

Conclusions

THE BAKU YOUTH INITIATIVE

The conference “Beyond religious differences: Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination based on religion or belief: consequences for young people and youth work responses” was held in Baku, Azerbaijan, from 5 to 8 November 2008 in the spirit of consolidating the results of the “All Different – All Equal” European youth campaign, including the Istanbul Youth Declaration. The conference was co-organised by the Council of Europe’s Directorate of Youth and Sport, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the Ministry of Youth and Sport of Azerbaijan and in co-operation with the European Youth Forum and the Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Development and Cooperation; it brought together over 100 participants from 42 countries.

The conference aimed at responding to islamophobia, antisemitism and other forms of discrimination based on religion or belief, through youth work. It strengthened and consolidated the work undertaken in this field by its co-organisers and partners.

The promotion of dialogue and understanding is by all means the key condition for the achievement of peace, security, development and prosperity of our societies. Inter-religious dialogue constitutes one of the main aspects of dialogue among cultures and civilisations and play an important role in consolidating the common values of respect, dignity and freedom.

Combating religious discrimination and prejudice concerns everyone and is necessary in all societies. Young people and youth organisations are particularly concerned because they can be effective actors and promoters of change

Considering the increasingly participative position of youth in society as an active emerging force, policy and decision-makers are asked more than ever to integrate their concerns and initiatives in their global framework of action.

Based on the inputs of experts and the discussions in working groups, the conference stressed that islamophobia and all other forms of discrimination and prejudice must be combated and that universal human rights must be defended and promoted for all human beings, without discrimination on any grounds.

The conference recalled that “Islamophobia must not be the concern of Muslims alone as it has negative effects on all children and young people, men and women alike, and the whole of society. Islamophobia is a violation of human rights and a threat to social cohesion. Young people and youth organisations have an important role to play in preventing Islamophobia and raising awareness about the negative impact of prejudice and discrimination.”¹

Promoting tolerance and respect for diversity, in the spirit of intercultural dialogue, implies unconditional commitment to human rights as a framework for dialogue. Young people and youth organisations have an irreplaceable role to play in this process, notably through youth work activities that incorporate human rights education and intercultural learning. Human rights education and intercultural learning provide the framework for values and educational approaches that address prejudice and discrimination in its multiple expressions, including islamophobia, antisemitism, christianophobia and any other form of discrimination based on religion or belief (or associated to them), and must be promoted as a safeguard for democracy and equality and a protection against extremism.

The co-organisers of the conference are resolved to pursue their commitment to this work by joining efforts and expertise and by supporting initiatives and projects of young people and youth organisations that effectively promote tolerance and human rights education, while combating prejudice and religious discrimination.

The conference agreed on the necessity to encourage follow-up projects by youth organisations – in the framework of this Baku Youth Initiative – aimed at promoting intercultural understanding as well as raising awareness on relevant issues in this field. Such projects should be based on the conclusions and outcomes of this conference, namely those elaborated by its working groups and outlined below. Those projects should reflect, in particular, the major policy documents of the partner organizations of the conference.

1. Religion, culture and identity

Religion and culture often form an inseparable part of the identity of many young people. Threats to their cultural or religious belonging can endanger the development of open and confident identities and undermine the potential of multiple cultural affiliations that characterises everyone. Intercultural youth projects are important means of developing self-confidence and countering the negative consequences of islamophobia, antisemitism, christianophobia and prejudice in general.

¹ Conclusions of the seminar “Islamophobia and its consequences on young people”, European Youth Centre Budapest 2004

Two possible examples of such projects:

Memorial Village

The objective of this project is dialogue between civilisations. Other goals are cultural exchange, understanding historical background, educational exchange, youth business partnerships and international campaigning on understanding identity, religion, culture and history. The project will include information about relevant programmes and initiatives developed by international partners of the Baku conference.

Religions and Democracy

This project is about the revival of interest in religious practices in the world and how this may breed suspicion and fear among authorities and the public in general.

Part of the project is to create formal mechanisms which will include experts from various religions (including Christianity, Islam and Judaism) such as scholars, youth leaders and civil society leaders to:

- explore contemporary issues connected to religion and democracy;
- share understandings and practices of religious and democratic values such as pluralism, religious tolerance, rule of law, respect for human rights, participation in elections (especially among youth) and youth participation in intercultural dialogue.
- increase opportunities for partnerships between formal and informal religious groups and address issues of mutual concern.

2. Religion and gender equality

Gender inequality is a condition manifest in societies worldwide, mirrored, upheld and reinforced by religion and belief structures. Gender inequality cannot be supported or explained through religion. However, religious scriptures can be intentionally misinterpreted to reinforce and support existing gender inequality in society.

In order to work towards gender equality, social structures and cultural patterns relating to gender must be changed. Prospective actions in the field are:

- Education as a tool for social transformation: education is crucial to foster change from the bottom, from the civil society and actors involved so as to impact on the notion of “gender roles” in a way which helps to dismantle some of the social structures which produce or reproduce gender inequality. This includes:
 - empowering women and sensitising the public;
 - raising awareness on human rights and religion issues.
- Results are best achieved through effective actions with a bottom-up approach such as:
 - publication of research material such as reports or tool kits to increase knowledge and to improve skills;
 - round-tables of young professionals active in the field to foster exchange of information and trigger more innovative actions;
 - organisation of workshops on a local, national and/or international level, aimed to foster interaction and empowerment of young women and young men;
- campaigns aimed to sensitise on gender equality;
- international exchange programs, accessible particularly to young people from minorities and to disadvantaged young people.

3. Freedom of expression and freedom of religion

Freedom of religion and freedom of expression are fundamental principles in all democratic societies. However, these concepts are not easily defined and delimited; they may overlap or come into conflict as they emphasise different principles and values. When they conflict, it is necessary to relate them to other human rights as stipulated in international human rights law.

State responsibilities and religious roles should be distinguished. Religious communities are subject to national legal orders, which are supposed to deal with all religions on equal basis. Direct governmental support of religious communities should be avoided; however, if the state decides so, all religious groups shall be treated equally and on a proportional basis.

Family law issues should be regulated by the law of the particular state in respect of human rights. Religious ceremonies (such as weddings or funerals) should be legally recognised by the state.

Citizens have the right to observe their religious traditions, including the possibility to not work on important religious days and festivities. Youth organisations should help state authorities in finding reasonable ways of accommodating these needs, especially in the course of employment and education.

While enjoying freedom of expression, it is necessary to do it in sensitive ways that are respectful to beliefs of people; incitement to violence and hatred must be prevented. Youth organisations should keep this in mind especially in course of preparation of publications, press releases and other materials for the media.

Youth should be encouraged to facilitate programmes focused on acquiring inter-cultural and inter-religious competences in order to avoid misunderstandings among cultures and religions.

Local and regional youth inter-religious response teams and mediators should be created to engage in tackling large-scale crisis in their vicinity.

Platforms and open spaces for youth that organise, participate in and support interfaith based events should be created.

Intersectorial meetings between young activists and decision makers should be organised in order to shape youth policies that consider interfaith activities and to foster interfaith dialogue at regional, national and international level.

4. Prejudice and stereotypes: media and education

The increasing levels of discrimination and intolerance against ‘the other’ in the world are pointing to a need for an active development of a tolerant and inclusive social environment. Education and media are the platforms that can and should be used to reverse this trend and to combat all types of prejudice and discrimination.

A proposal for further work within the field of education is to revise and develop existing standards and to reflect upon the current challenges. Both formal and non-formal education should include positive exposure to the diversity of faiths, religions and ethnicities in a way that will encourage a climate of acceptance through critical thinking and an open mindset.

International media workshops should be initiated where experts in different fields of research and media practice can develop tools and methods to combat negative images and forms of stigmatisation of ‘the other’ in the media.

5. Co-existence and living together, community building and migration

Community-building and social cohesion can be enhanced by a combination of factors and actions, combining, inter alia, education, positive media reporting, highlighting examples of good practices in the integration of migrants and respect for their religion and their cultural human rights:

- to include target groups in decision-making processes at all levels;
- to create information points on possibilities for financing activities;
- to facilitate dialogue; listening to each other, to the needs and wants;
- to include 'the other' in all aspects of social life;
- to challenge stereotypes and to provide alternative positive role models;
- to share practices of and by NGOs working in this field;
- to empower migrants and fight discrimination and multiple discrimination against them;
- to create spaces and, through different methods, bring people of different communities together (youth clubs, summer camps, cafés, sports opportunities, exhibitions, museums, cultural events, culinary sharing);
- to support migrants to learn the language(s) of the host society;
- to research on relevant issues in order to identify the needs and wants of the minorities themselves;
- to produce observatory reports on manifestations of islamophobic actions in the society in order to raise awareness and fight against such discrimination.

6. Young people and extremism

Measures against extremism are about dealing with forms of criminal radical activities and are not directed against any religion specifically. The need for social inclusion is significant, and involving the creative energies of young people is essential. Often, the hardest to reach are those who feel whose voices are least heard – this is where policy and practice needs to be concentrated. Several approaches to overcome extremism are possible:

- the role of peer to peer education is an important tool in reaching out at young people at risk;
- further studies still need to be made in order to get a better understanding of the phenomena of extremism and its relation to young people;
- education as an important part of the social inclusion of young people needs to be proactive and awareness-raising, showing the benefits from learning about others;
- integration and assimilation policies should be undertaken in order to deal with extremism, including social, political and cultural empowerment;
- projects tackling youth extremism caused by social exclusion at all levels (from personal exclusion to exclusion in decision making processes) should be initiated;
- youth empowerment needs to be focused at the national and international levels which would help build confidence and trust in democratic systems;
- governments should respect guidelines on appropriate language and procedures when dealing with alleged extremism. In particular they should avoid any language that implicates religion and ethnic communities as a whole or holds them responsible for manifestations of extremism,

- documentaries and publications analysing root causes of extremism and types of reactions towards extremism should be produced in order to provide balanced imageries of different religions and encourage confidence, awareness, respect and trust.