INTERCULTURAL CITIES POLICY BRIEFS

Engaging with faith and convictional communities in the Intercultural city

The Council of Europe and its partner cities have developed an intercultural approach to diversity and inclusion (including migrant integration) which enables cities to foster "unity in diversity" and 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;

Different religious faiths and other worldviews form an important part of the growing diversity of many contemporary cities. However, national governments and local authorities across Europe often find it challenging to engage effectively with them, and to encourage those who hold diverse views and practice diverse faiths to relate positively with each other. This briefing paper[1] sets out why engaging with those holding and living out different religious faiths and worldviews is an important dimension of the activities of intercultural cities, and can contribute to fostering trust, living together, combat prejudice and help realise the 'diversity advantage'.

Across Europe, research has shown that faith groups' substantial contributions to civil society frequently include significant roles within cultural heritage/diversity, social capital and the development of social welfare services. These aspects all have significant potential to add to the wellbeing of citizens and to a city's collective diversity advantage. Realising this advantage requires a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of relationships between religious belief, religious practice, participation in a religious community, the cultural role of religion and religious tradition, as well their diverse interactions with different cultures and migration histories. Such understanding can be acquired through targeted training as well as through various initiatives involving citizens on the ground.

[1] This paper is based, *inter alia*, on the report Faith in Intercultural Cities: Recognising religions as part of local diversity, and exploring how they can contribute to the diversity advantage of cities by Dr Andrew Orton, Durham University

A holistic approach

To be most effective, city approaches for engaging faiths in intercultural strategies should be embedded in broader diversity and inclusion strategies, reach out to different potential stakeholders and operating at different levels. It is necessary to consider carefully who should be involved, making sure to recognise diversity *within* religious groups as well as *between* religious groups, finding ways to involve significant groups (such as women and young people) otherwise excluded from official leadership roles within some religious communities. Furthermore, finding positive and creative ways of engaging with those who would not normally be interested in connecting with people of other faiths is crucial in broadening the scope and impact of strategies.

These strategies should privilege dialogue between stakeholders (stakeholder including not only faith leaders but also civic and opinion leaders), reasonable accommodation, appropriate education/urban pedagogy, and inclusive even-handedness (local authorities should behave in an impartial way (not seeking to favour one group over another). Dialogue is important, but not sufficient in itself – it is the first step of a journey which should lead to a process of co-creation, which is the ultimate expression of equal citizenship.

These strategies can be overseen or advised by specific structures such as an interfaith or intercultural council where preferably not only faith groups but also various public institutions and mainstream civil society organisations are represented. It is important to make a particular effort to involve hard-to-reach faith groups as well as humanists, atheists, and other 'lifestance' communities which does see themselves as religious in nature. The goal of interfaith relations is social/community cohesion; therefore it concerns potentially all members of the community.

Such a structure could be a valuable resource for policy-making on issues such as religious burial spaces, public religious ceremonies and celebrations, as well as conflict prevention and resolution around the public expressions of faith.[2]

Providing support to (inter)faith groups and initiatives

The type of public support which can be provided to individual religious organisations and communities is usually regulated by law and is outside the scope of this paper. However, whenever there is at the discretion of local authorities to decide on certain types of support, the key principles which should be followed, from an intercultural perspective are:

- Provide balanced support to different faith groups, subject to their adhesion to fundamental principles of human rights and democracy, and ensure the freedom and the right to have a faith, as well as the right not to have a faith, as well as the freedom of conscience and of expression;

- Support as a priority those initiatives which foster interaction and build bridges between different faiths and convictions. Examples are 'open mosque' and 'open church' days welcoming visitors willing to find out more about different faiths.

[2] Examples: Le Comité Interreligieux auprès du Conseil Régional d'Alsace; Marseille Espérance; Le Conseil Extra municipal de la Laïcité et du Vivre Ensemble (CELVE)

For example the "Long night of religions" was organized in Berlin in 2014. Over one hundred faith-related places opened their doors for people to sing, pray, and discuss, attend guided visits and readings. A massive table was laid out to invite people to share water, bread and biscuits. At 11 pm an interfaith prayer for peace has taken place. In 2015 such events were planned to take place in Montréal and Paris, thanks to the efforts of the association Coexister (http://www.coexister.fr/)

- The creation of shared physical and virtual spaces providing other opportunities for mutual engagement, whether (for example) through sharing buildings or through using the internet to encourage networking between faith groups, and between faith groups and the wider community, by creating a digital 'community space'. The goal is to create shared spaces, not dominated by one faith group.

Developing shared/interfaith spaces within regeneration developments had been tried by some cities such as London Lewisham. This had proved to be a long and complex process, not least in terms of finding groups willing to co-operate over the use of shared spaces and finding ways to handle the ongoing management of any buildings developed. The involvement of wider stakeholders such as private developers in these processes is an important key for success.

In Fisksätra, Nacka, south of Stockholm, Muslims, Lutherans and Roman Catholics are part of a unique project attempting to tackle sectarianism by bringing the three groups together in a common "House of God". According to Henrik Larsson, a pastor with the Church of Sweden in Nacka and project manager of the initiative, the new building would be the only place of worship of its type in the world and the first time that a mosque and a church have been part of the same building since the Umayyad Mosque was built in Damascus in the 600s[3].

Other examples are interreligious calendars (Grenoble, Montréal…), opening of neutral prayer spaces…)

Building trust, dealing with conflicts and faith-related dilemmas

Faith groups and persons involved in faith communities can be a valuable resource for the city in dealing with conflicts or finding responses to faith-related dilemmas in the public sphere or in enterprises. In order to enable them to be such resource, the local authorities may set up or support spaces and opportunities for dialogue and debate, for example:

- organising meetings of businesses and the different faiths represented in the community to discuss faith issues that can affect employees and to work out common approaches for the workplaces and service delivery[4];

- supporting events which facilitate inter-personal connections and interaction of people across faiths and convictions for example through sharing food, cultural and music festivals or simply enabling those holding diverse views and religious affiliations to spend time together in the private arena, visit each other's homes, go to theatre, take part in each other's holy feasts, and go on shared walks or participate in "neighbours festivals" together.

[3] http://www.thelocal.se/20110302/32360; http://www.apg29.nu/index.php?artid=14930&hl=en
[4] Resource: http://www.lecese.fr/travaux-publies/le-fait-religieux-dans-lentreprise

- encouraging learning about different religions, in particular through cultural and educational actions (eg. Olso Faith museum). Where civil servants lack knowledge of faith and faith groups, this can lead to fear and raise barriers to building positive engagement with faith groups. Therefore, training professionals to interact with different groups and work positively and proactively with these issues is particularly important.

- developing more effective ways of supporting interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding between diverse perspectives/groups in schools and amongst young people to help them learn about different religions and practice living- and doing-together as an antidote to sectarianism and hatred[5]; promoting cities as potential tourist destinations to wider markets by reflecting the interesting nature of local cultural and religious diversity.

An example of success story is a photo competition for young people on 'Religion in Copenhagen' which had provoked widespread positive engagement.

The Rotterdam "City safari" initiative enables both visitors and locals to book custom tours to places related to different cultures and religious in the city, and to even visit the homes and experience the hospitality of people with different religious and cultural backgrounds; The Neuchâtoi campaign in Neuchâtel, allowed citizens to visit the homes of young people with different faith backgrounds to demystify the fantasies and show light on the reality of young people of all faiths having similar lifestyles and interests.

- finding ways to publicly discuss remaining dilemmas and to develop effective processes to address the continuing underlying conflicts in practice.

An example of how this could be done is the city of Botkyrka which facilitated public dialogue over requests for a 'call to prayer' from Muslims. The process adopted in Botkyrka had included explicit attempts to:
- recognise that any reactions should be seen in a wider context;
- agree shared values and principles that should apply equally to all groups in the city;
- involve a wide range of different perspectives in the discussions; *and*
- seek to proactively manage any conflict that may otherwise have arisen.

The association "All Together" in Sarajevo, brings since 30 years together young people from different ethnic communities and faiths to carry out social and educational actions for reconciliation[6].

[5] Some organisations, such as Coexister, have a leading experience in this field
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/Newsletter/newsletter37/coexister_en.asp
[6] http://www.mrv.ba/eng/projekti/grupa-za-mlade-svi-zajedno