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Intercultural Cities (ICC) Programme Advisory Group 7th meeting – Report

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1. Participants

Present at the meeting:

- Bergen, Norway - Mari Garaas Løchen
- Donostia/San Sebastián, Spain - Silvia Carballo Paz
- Neuchâtel Canton, Switzerland - Grégory Jaquet
- Wrocław, Poland - Ewa Magnowska
- Spanish network of Intercultural Cities (RECI) - Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez
- Mexico City, Mexico - Jorge Jimenez Ortega
- ICC Secretariat – Rita Marascalchi, AYTEK Cingitas, Ben Freeman, Célia Charre

Online:

- Porto, Portugal – Maria Raquel Castello Branco

2. Welcome and update on the latest developments in the ICC Programme and upcoming activities

The seventh meeting of the ICC Advisory Group on 28 October 2025 provided an opportunity for members to review recent ICC activities, share updates from their cities, regions, and networks, exchange views and ideas on various aspects of the ICC Programme. Members discussed strategies to strengthen political engagement in the ICC Programme, explored ways to bridge connections with academia, and brainstormed initiatives for the ICC Anniversary 2026–2027. The meeting also prepared the Advisory Group's contribution to the ICC Coordinators meeting in Bergen on 29–30 October 2025 and identified follow-up actions for pending tasks.

The meeting began with a welcome and an update on the latest developments in the ICC Programme and upcoming activities.

The Advisory Group reviewed the main highlights of the ICC Programme, including new cities in which Expert visits and Index reports were conducted. Members then discussed the Council of Europe's New Democratic Pact for Europe, emphasising its importance in a period when democracy is under pressure and democratic backsliding on the rise. Members explored how the ICC Programme could contribute to the Pact and integrate it into the activities already carried out by the Programme and its members, underlining that intercultural inclusion is intrinsically relevant to the Pact as it provides a preventive, resilience-building and constructive alternative to backsliding and anti-rights narratives or policies.

The session continued with an update on the reform of the ICC Programme to introduce a graduated fee scale based on country GDP and city population size. This reform is designed to address inequalities in the current membership model and ensure fairness, transparency, and sustainability, as per 2022 independent evaluation's recommendations. The current fee system had led to uneven accessibility. The new scale would apply immediately to new members while existing members would transition gradually over two years.

3. Presentation: The new template and guide for collecting good practices

The ICC Secretariat presented the new template and guide for collecting good practices, designed to showcase the impact of intercultural policies, inspire replication, demonstrate political commitment to equality and inclusion, and facilitate experience exchange among cities. A discussion followed on the qualification criteria, emphasising measurable impact, transferability, and sustainability.

Members noted that some cities need encouragement to share their practices and suggested webinars, periodic calls and targeted communications to boost contributions. Practices were identified as a key asset for the ICC Programme, with researchers and other Council of Europe entities using the database for studies

and reports. It was highlighted that the value of a practice often lies in its adaptability to local contexts and the tangible results achieved.

The importance of analysing data to identify high-impact practices was emphasized. The template and guide were also shared in written form after the meeting. Current submissions tend to focus on activities rather than outcomes; emphasis should shift toward demonstrating measurable change to justify the work. While practices can sometimes serve as PR exercises, the goal is to show tangible transformation, aligned with the Council of Europe's PMM methodology and integrating cross-cutting aspects.

It was also suggested highlighting the most important purpose behind each practice, linking practices to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to further enhance their value, designing an online form that departments could easily complete, and including contact details to facilitate horizontal follow-up. Capacity constraints can make collecting good practices challenging and mobilizing networks of stagiaires, researchers or other facilitators to support data collection could increase the number of practices reported. Study visits already offer cities opportunities to showcase and prepare practices.

The members agreed that good practices remain one of the Programme's strongest assets. They attract attention, demonstrate impact, and are frequently referenced by other CoE bodies, while also serving as an effective promotional tool for potential new member cities.

4. Discussion: Strengthening Political Engagement in the ICC Programme

The discussion focused on ways to increase the involvement of elected representatives and political leaders in ICC activities. Engaging new leadership in changing political contexts was identified as a challenge, while increased political participation was recognised as beneficial for both the programme and participating cities.

Members proposed strategies such as study visits, awards for good practices, tailored communications, participation in prestigious Council of Europe events, and the creation of an annual assembly for local leaders. It was emphasised that visibility, prestige, and demonstrable benefits are key to fostering political commitment. Frequent leadership changes pose challenges for continuity and institutional memory, making strong political leadership essential for local ownership and programme visibility. Supporting "ally" politicians is particularly important in the current European context, when and where ICC principles face criticism.

It was also noted that deep engagement may be difficult, but some participation is feasible through study visits for councillors, dedicated meetings, visibility tools (e.g., ICC logos on city websites, or templates for email signatures signalling ICC membership), and invitations to annual ICC events. "Strategic engagement" of politicians and granting politicians high visibility was recommended. Developing a standard presentation for political representatives highlighting tangible benefits of intercultural inclusion was suggested as a concrete tool to raise awareness and support. Political advisors were identified as a secondary target group.

RECI stressed the need to counter perceptions of intercultural initiatives as "naïve," while Neuchâtel highlighted the potential of young mayors. Porto suggested also involving councillors and deputy mayors responsible for inclusion and integration to ensure more effective engagement. Wrocław proposed an ambassadorship or buddy system, where experienced ICC cities mentor new ones to maintain continuity. Mexico City emphasized stronger links with national parliaments and PACE to reflect intercultural inclusion in legislation. A newsletter showcasing city achievements and offering visibility to mayors was also recommended to incentivize engagement.

5. Discussion: Bridging academia and the ICC Programme

The Advisory Group then focused on bridging academia and the ICC Programme. Members discussed ways to strengthen partnerships with universities and researchers, integrating academic expertise into ICC activities. Examples from Mexico City, Wrocław, and Bergen highlighted collaborations on research projects, master's programs, internships, and experimental workshops.

The discussion emphasized structured, mutually beneficial partnerships, transparent collaboration, and practical applications of research findings to inform public policy. Proposals included creating an ICC chair, a master's degree on interculturality, a network of intercultural universities, and online platforms connecting scholars with city initiatives. Members stressed the importance of feedback loops to ensure research benefits local communities and the visibility of academic contributions. The possibility of dedicated landing pages for academia on the ICC website and thematic tags within the Good Practice database was raised to facilitate access and dissemination of research outputs.

RECI noted that while ICC principles are increasingly integrated into curricula and research, results are not systematically shared with the Secretariat. For instance, the University of Valencia is conducting an ICC-related project, but outcomes remain unknown to the Programme. Tenerife was highlighted as an example of a structured partnership with a university, showing the potential for collaboration. Members emphasised that presenting research results would be a win-win, strengthening relationships with universities and allowing ICC to benefit from academic outputs. Better information flow and building a pool of expertise within universities already linked to ICC experts were deemed essential.

Examples included Pompeu Fabra University's course on intercultural challenges, the University of San Sebastián's human rights course with essay competitions awarding Strasbourg course participation, and Mexican national universities' partnerships on intercultural development, often focused mainly on indigenous issues. Suggestions for strengthening engagement included co-organising conferences, delivering masterclasses or guest lectures, involving academia in programme design (such as training intercultural mediators), defining research questions of interest to ICC, providing internships, and ensuring control and follow-up on how shared data is used. RECI noted that final dissertations could respond to research questions posed by ICC entities. Neuchâtel proposed an award for the best thesis on interculturalism, while Bergen recommended incorporating academic outputs into the Good Practice database or publishing them to showcase impact.

Other examples shared included Neuchâtel collaborating with universities on studies challenging assumptions about Spanish and Portuguese immigrant participation, Wrocław's Migration-City-Council Lab linking interdisciplinary research questions to city needs, and experimental classes with anthropology students testing intercultural dialogue in public spaces. The value of integrating intergenerational perspectives, challenging assumptions, and translating local research into international practice was emphasized. Mexico City highlighted courses on ICC and intercultural good practices, with students producing research linked to city experiences. Bergen illustrated how researchers often explore ICC practices directly within cities.

Finally, members discussed mapping existing calls and awards to identify channels for intercultural research, the potential for symbolic recognition of academic outputs through awards or publications, and the importance of creating visibility for universities and scholars contributing to ICC work.

6. Brainstorming on ICC Anniversary 2026–2027

In the afternoon, the Advisory Group brainstormed ideas for the ICC 20th Anniversary (2026–2027). Members agreed that the celebration should highlight the programme's achievements, strengthen the network, raise

public and political awareness, and have a lasting legacy. A distributed and modular approach was proposed, including integrating existing activities into the campaign, establishing a shared visual identity, and coordinating symbolic moments across events in different cities. Ideas discussed included collective artistic initiatives, campaigns against hate speech, school exhibitions, and an interactive map of ICC good practices. A communication campaign featuring a shared narrative, short documentaries, a collective publication, and a dedicated website was also suggested, alongside the involvement of regional ambassadors and public figures.

The anniversary could further include commissioning an updated impact study, drafting a political declaration, promoting academic collaboration, and encouraging joint projects among cities. It could culminate in an international conference in a founding city, presenting the impact study, awarding outstanding practices, and defining strategic priorities for the next decade.

San Sebastián proposed a “20 people, 20 stories” campaign, sharing both positive and challenging experiences from ICC cities to create a unified and optimistic message. RECI suggested a multi-city conference on discrimination. The ICC Secretariat emphasized that the anniversary should both celebrate and communicate, serving as a catalyst for change. Bergen highlighted the potential of media partnerships to amplify visibility, while Wrocław recommended a joint statement by mayors and mapping existing 2027 events to brand them under the ICC anniversary umbrella. The ICC Secretariat also suggested concentrating activities within one dedicated month to increase impact.

Neuchâtel stressed that celebrations should be public facing, demonstrating the tangible benefits of ICC initiatives and answering the question, “What changes in your life thanks to ICC?” Bergen noted the importance of addressing two target groups: strengthening the internal network and raising external political and public awareness. Porto highlighted the power of visual storytelling through videos, testimonies, and personal experiences, and proposed creating a dedicated anniversary logo or brand to unify events. Wrocław suggested labelling existing city events under the ICC anniversary umbrella using defined criteria. RECI supported organizing additional ICC-specific events beyond ongoing activities. The ICC Secretariat underlined the value of linking anniversary visibility with evidence of impact, such as mapping active cities and thematic good practices. A possible campaign message proposed was: *“Because of the ICC / Thanks to ICC...”*.

7. Preparation for the ICC Annual Coordinators meeting

Preparation for the ICC Annual Coordinators meeting focused on presenting the Advisory Group’s contribution. Members discussed slides introducing current members, their objectives, and follow-up on the renewal process, building on the July meeting discussions.

8. Contributions from members and any other business

Contributions from members highlighted notable city-level experiences, including participatory governance in Mexico City through consultation with indigenous communities and comprehensive training for public employees to promote diversity and combat discrimination. Discussions on the ICC Index emphasized making it more dynamic and useful for cities, facilitating comparison exercises, and ensuring results guide local policies. Improvements to the ICC website and the importance of the Programme’s response to populist and anti-inclusive narratives were also discussed. Members agreed on maintaining active participation in thematic working groups, valuing synergies between experienced and new cities, sharing tools, and strengthening the international dimension to counter polarisation.

9. Conclusion

The meeting concluded with the agreement that the 8th Advisory Group meeting will take place online in the first semester of 2026, tentatively scheduled for the weeks starting 25 May or 1 June, with the proposed thematic focus "Communication of and in the ICC Programme.

It was suggested to circulate clear and concise pre-meeting questions and to explore external good practices from other networks on the topics discussed.

A Doodle poll will be used to confirm the final dates, taking into account that 25 May is a public holiday in Norway, and 4–5 June are public holidays in Poland.

Annex: Agenda of the 7th Advisory Group Meeting.

Intercultural Cities (ICC) Programme Advisory Group

7th meeting

28 October 2025, Bergen (Norway)

Draft agenda

Venue: Bergen rådhus (city hall), ([Rådhusgaten 10, 5014 Bergen, Norway](#))

Purpose of the meeting: The seventh meeting of the ICC Advisory Group will provide an opportunity for members to review recent ICC activities, share updates from their cities, regions, and networks, and exchange experiences. Members will discuss strategies to strengthen political engagement in the ICC programme, explore ways to bridge connections with academia, brainstorm initiatives for the ICC Anniversary 2026–2027 and exchange on updates. The meeting will also prepare the Advisory Group's contribution to the ICC Coordinators meeting in Bergen (29–30 October 2025) and identify follow-up actions for pending tasks.

9:30 – 9:45 Welcome and update on the latest developments in the ICC Programme and upcoming activities

Rita Marascalchi, Head of the Intercultural Inclusion Unit

9:45 – 10:00 Presentation: The new template & guide for collecting good practices

Ben Freeman, Senior Project Officer, Intercultural Inclusion Unit

10:00 – 11:00 Discussion: Strengthening Political Engagement in the ICC Programme

- How can the ICC Programme increase the involvement of elected representatives and political leaders in its activities?
- Would stronger political-level engagement help advance the ICC agenda and visibility at the local and national levels?
- What concrete strategies or actions could be developed to encourage political leaders' participation and sense of ownership in the ICC Programme?

11:00 – 11:30 *FAMILY PICTURE AND COFFEE BREAK*

11:30 – 12:30 Discussion: Bridging academia and the ICC Programme

- How can the ICC Programme strengthen its connections with academic experts and universities?
- What are some existing good practices or successful examples of collaboration between the ICC and academic institutions?
- What opportunities and mechanisms could be developed to better integrate academic expertise into the ICC's work and activities?

12:30 – 13:45 *LUNCH BREAK*

- 13:45 – 14:45 Brainstorming on ICC Anniversary 2026–2027
- How should the ICC Programme mark its upcoming anniversary in a way that highlights its achievements and impact?
 - What types of events, visibility actions, or activities could be organised at local, national, and international levels?
 - How can the anniversary be used to strengthen the ICC network and raise political and public awareness of the programme?
- 14:45 – 15:15 Preparation for the ICC Annual Coordinators meeting
Members will prepare Advisory Group's contribution to the ICC coordinators' meeting and appoint a rapporteur.
- 15:15 – 15:30 *COFFEE BREAK*
- 15:30 - 16:30 Contributions from members and any other business
Exchange of updates and ideas, proposals, and feedback on the Programme, including:
- Sharing of good practices and recent initiatives from member cities;
 - Discussion on improving the ICC Index process;
 - Feedback and ideas on the ICC website to enhance user experience;
 - Any other proposal, feedback, advice that the Advisory Group members wish to share with the Programme (emerging challenges, interesting, good practices, capacity building or other needs...)
- 16:30 – 16:45 Next meeting and closure
8th AG meeting will take place online in the first semester of 2026, (tentatively during the weeks starting 25 May or 1 June) with a proposed thematic focus on "Communication of and in the ICC Programme".
- 19:30 Dinner at [Bien Basar](#) restaurant ([Vetrlidsallmenningen 2, 5014 Bergen, Norway](#))