

**Intercultural Cities Side event on:
Urban policies for the inclusive integration of migrants
Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Summer Session**

Speech by Ms Marte Mjøs Persen, Mayor of Bergen (Norway)

Madam Deputy Secretary General,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to come to Strasbourg to discuss and present some examples of how we are working in Bergen to manage ethnic diversity in a positive way.

Some of you know Bergen well, some of you do not. I would therefore like to start by presenting our city with some short facts.

Bergen lies on the west coast of Norway in Hordaland County. The city of Bergen is rich in history, culture and the tourism sector. Additionally, our region has several world leading business clusters within the marine industry, the maritime and the energy sector. We are also proud that Bergen is regarded as one of the seafood capitols of the world.

Approximately 270 000 people live in Bergen. The Bergeners are known to be very proud of our city and regard ourselves as open and diverse. We have migrants from over 160 countries residing in our city, counting for about 18% of the population.

The wealth of this city, like so many other cities, has been built by people migrating to the city from abroad and establishing new trade links. Even today many of the most established merchant families in Bergen have Dutch and German family names from the Hanseatic time. We hope that the migrants coming to Bergen these days also will contribute to develop the City further.

The ethnic diversity in Bergen has increased a lot since the 1990s, mainly as a result of a positive economic development in our city and a need for more labor force. The City of Bergen has ambitions to make better use of the advantage of having an increasingly diversified population. We believe it is a comparative advantage for Bergen having a multilingual, multicultural population with strong links to a wide range of countries. Being an inclusive city also means that the council has a special responsibility in making the municipal services accessible to everyone. Our aim is that everybody living in Bergen has a sense of belonging to an inclusive city community.

In Bergen we use terms inclusion and diversity - not integration. This change of terminology has been made in order to emphasize that there are different ways to be a citizen of Bergen and Norway. The term *integration* is often referred to as the process newly arrived immigrants have to go through in order to function in the work place and society - to be fully integrated is the end result of this process. In official Norwegian the term is defined as: *"..how newly arrived immigrants as fast as possible can participate actively in working life and in society as a whole"*

In everyday-Norwegian the term "integration" can be regarded as synonymous to assimilation; How well integrated you are becomes a measure of how "Norwegian" you are. By using the term inclusion we would like to emphasize that in order to benefit from the advantages of diversity all parties need to be willing to develop and undergo a transformation – including local authorities.

Being a member of the Intercultural cities network make an important contribution to Bergen's efforts to become a more inclusive city. This capacity-building program supports us in developing, implementing and evaluating local diversity and inclusion strategies and give us a network of cities we can contact to exchange experiences and discuss common challenges.

We find it very positive that the Council of Europe has taken the initiative to establish this useful network and developing it further in close contact with the cities listening to their needs.

In the following I would like to highlight three key policy areas that are important for the city government in Bergen when it comes to the inclusion of migrants and are Bergens' examples of best practice.

The first area I would like to mention has to do with the long term inclusion of refugees and our focus on enabling them to participate in the work market. The large number of refugees arriving in Europe in 2015 has resulted in a need to resettle more refugees than ever before in Bergen. Like many other cities in Europe the City of Bergen regard it as an important humanitarian responsibility and a privilege to welcome people in need of protection. We regard refugees as "normal" people living in extraordinary circumstances.

We therefore want the refugees that are being resettled in Bergen to be able to start their new lives in the city as soon as possible. Shortly after arrival in Bergen they are being enrolled in a two year introduction program where they learn Norwegian and take courses to qualify in the work market or further education.

There are now around 900 participants in this program in Bergen and this group is diverse both in terms of country of origin and their education and work backgrounds. Some of them are highly skilled professionals that can find work in Norway after a fairly short period of time. But many of the refugees come from the most troubled countries in the world and have not yet had the opportunity to have an education or relevant work experience.

The introduction program offers the refugees an individually tailored program in close cooperation with the participant. The goal is that a high percentage of the participants in the program will be enabled to provide for themselves and their families at the end of the program. Results show that the end of the 2 year program between 40 and 50 % are being employed or enter the regular education system. We acknowledge that many of the refugees need more time to be able to compete in the Norwegian work market.

Bergen has since the 1970s hosted leading researchers within the field of Norwegian as a second language. The Norwegian Language Test Centre that designs the official Norwegian language test for foreigners is located in the University of Bergen. Nygård skole, the City's Norwegian language center also has a highly competent staff.

In 2015, the center had more than 3000 adult students. In accordance with national recommendations Bergen will have a focus on work-focused language learning. The participants in the introduction program should have the possibility to have language training in real work life as well as work practice. The different departments in the City all provide a number of places for this purpose. I believe that a focus on starting the refugee inclusion process early, language courses and work training is essential in securing good welcoming services for refugees.

I have always believed that in order to be successful regarding our work with inclusion and diversity, we are dependent on NGOs and people who volunteer. One of these programs which have come out of such work is the Refugee-guide program. This is an activity established in cooperation with the Red Cross which works with Norwegian people willing to meet-up with refugees. It is about providing matchmaking between locals and refugees that commit to spend time together over a 9-month period. These meeting opportunities also provide a chance for refugees to practice Norwegian and get acquainted with bureaucracy or social norms, as well as for Norwegians to get knowledge about the social and political situation of foreign countries.

Each year, the Red Cross in Bergen registers approximately a hundred connections between refugees and Norwegians within the frame of this activity. It has been going on for more than 15 years and many friendships have been made over the years.

Secondly, I would like to mention some of the inter-conventional dialog work we are doing in Bergen. This is an important part of our strategy for preventing radicalization and political extremism. One project in this area is a course for imams and leaders in the mosques in Bergen on issues like freedom of expression and religious diversity, and discussion groups on issues such as domestic violence, leadership and social integration. The design and content of this course has been developed in cooperation between the mosques and city officials. It has been very important that this is not a project that has been imposed on one of the parties, but a partnership between two mutual parties.

The police, church leaders, academics and other key stakeholders also participate in the project and it has increased the understanding between the participants. It has given us a platform where we can discuss difficult and even controversial issues in a setting where we all feel secure and have a mutual trust.

All the mosques in Bergen are involved in this project. The mosques have also been strengthened when faced with challenges regarding radicalization and can provide youth at risk with counter-narratives to radicalized ideas. We have also been working with the local Somali population, sought to address issues such as poor language skills, low levels of education and low employment rates, along with family breakdowns and fundamental cultural differences – all factors reflecting poor integration.

Promoting a diverse cultural heritage can have an important role for community cohesion as well. In Bergen we have had great success with the artistic project Fargespill – in English we call it – Kaleidoscope. The project is in essential a celebration of the diversity in Bergen. Fargespill is an ensemble consisting of children and youth from all over the world. Most of them have come to Norway as refugees and immigrants. The shows that are made consists mainly from folksongs and folkdance these children and youth have brought with them from their respective countries and cultures, on their journey all the way to Norway. The results are truly amazing. These young people are the heart of Fargespill where they meet excellent professional musicians and music teachers and pedagogues, and I am personally deeply impressed and fond of them all. Fargespill was born in Bergen, but the methods they are using are universal and the concept has been exported to several cities (23 in number) all over Norway. The method is easy enough: Ask not what they need, but what are your talent and what can you contribute with?

Residents in Bergen without a good command of Norwegian are entitled to translation services. When a staff member in the city does not have a common language with the client, an interpreter should be used. The municipal translation service in Bergen has more than 20

years of experience and offer translation in more than 50 languages. This service is of crucial importance to the ability of the city to offer equal public services to everybody.

Finally, I would like to underline the importance of cities when it comes to developing policies of managing diversity and securing peaceful coexistence in our communities. We – the cities - have a good understanding on how we make diversity work and how to invest in our communities to secure a sustainable cohesive society.

It is important that decision makers on a national and international level listen to our experiences on securing a peaceful coexistence in our communities. In Bergen and other European countries a large number of asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants are living for years without access to language training services and do not even have the right to work. As residents in our cities we meet this vulnerable group in our streets and services. Competencies on policies on immigration and the rights and responsibilities of migrants is a matter for the national political level but has a significant impact on the lives of residents in our cities. Of course I acknowledge the complexities of migration and inclusion policies but I would like to emphasize that we have valuable knowledge and experience in making diversity work.

Therefore, I once again would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to come here today and present this for all of you. A special thanks to the Council of Europe and the sponsors of today's event.

So, thank you for your attention!

Marte Mjøs Persen