

Dialogue with Muslim communities in Europe. Suggested practices for resolving and preventing problems related to the multicultural society

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Most of the examples and recommendations in this article are drawn from an international initiative (3) developed between 2001 and 2004 by the Institute for Research, Training and Action on Migration (IRFAM) as part of the European Commission's programme to combat discrimination and promote social rights (4). Local action and observation provide practical expertise on the most effective methods for preventing situations from reaching an impasse, or for overcoming an impasse if it does occur.

This document does not contain any 'magic formulas' that can be used everywhere and in every situation. Nonetheless, it aims to inspire readers by offering an ethical and pragmatic view of intercommunity dialogue as a tool for managing problematic situations. It identifies pertinent examples of dialogue, intercultural mediation, information dissemination, awareness-raising, involvement, meeting, consultation and collaboration practices involving people from all backgrounds with a view to strengthening Europe's democracies at local level through the cultural and spiritual enrichment of all whilst respecting human rights.

When it comes to relations with Muslim communities in Europe, local dialogue action means establishing channels for real communication between local decision-makers/actors and the communities/associations concerned for the purpose of arbitration and mediation focussing on jointly identified expectations and problems. While intercultural dialogue with Muslims is more than just a dialogue between faiths or communities, it must also be possible to address issues relating to religion and any form of spirituality.

What is intercultural dialogue?

Intercultural dialogue is not a debate on secularism or a theological debate on the truth, relevance or extent of one philosophy or another! Just imagine how dangerous such an exercise would be since, by definition, beliefs are based on dogmas and, in a democracy that recognises freedom of conscience, it is neither possible nor desirable to use a public initiative to convince oneself that one is right and that others are wrong.

Therefore, dialogue is not meant to be a process to convince others to convert to one's own religious or secular philosophy. Intercultural dialogue must allow for discussion of the multiplicity of worldviews and cultures as well as discussion of ways in which that diversity can be managed democratically, how it can contribute to society as a whole and what its significance and value are. For example, this kind of dialogue can play an important role both in resolving practical problems raised by the multicultural society and in constructing a concept of citizenship that values diversity and individual rights.

Readers may wonder why this booklet focuses on Islam in particular. Events in Algeria, the situation in many other Muslim countries, the September 11 attacks and other events have

caused some people to fear that dialogue with Islam is simply not possible. European humanists and democrats cannot simply settle for this kind of generalisation and irrational rejection: actions that contribute to the social cohesion of all Europeans, whatever their philosophical and religious convictions, are needed more urgently than ever before both at local level and, more widely, via the media. Another issue is precisely who should be involved in the dialogue. While religious leaders and intellectuals can of course contribute to dialogue with Muslims, it must primarily involve the citizenry in the broadest sense of the term and, in particular, those citizens who are appointed as group representatives via political mechanisms or associations.

Dialogue aimed at helping communities to live together

The aim of dialogue is to rise above prejudices, overcome disputes between population groups and develop solidarity around collective issues ('living together'). It will be noted that, starting from the allegedly problematic presence of Muslim communities, there is a tendency towards using activities that are the fruit of participatory democracies. Dialogue aims for pragmatic results. Engaging in a dialogue with different groups means ending separation or marginalisation of differences or those who are different. It is not an attempt to eliminate them, even by mutual agreement, for the benefit of a 'universal concept' that is only ever true for one of the groups involved. It is necessary, therefore, to acknowledge diversity and take it into account by trying to get to know each other and communicate in an effort to prevent conflicts. Dialogue, therefore, without touching on doctrinal areas, can lead to greater mutual understanding leading to joint actions. Such developments are possible thanks to the involvement of players who are dynamic, confident, open to external contributions and able to contextualise their beliefs and values.

The objective of this publication is to illustrate, via Europe, local problems and solutions applied as regards recognition of and dialogue with the Muslim minority. How can tensions be reduced? How can appropriate responses be made to the needs of population groups whilst also making local governance more democratic? The examples presented focus on municipalities where there is a significant level of Muslim integration and specific and controversial demands as regards freedom of religion and conscience.

10 lessons for local social cohesion policies

It is often the case that staff in public services, social workers, teachers, members of the media and local decision-makers find it difficult to envisage spontaneous, calm collaboration with members of the Muslim immigrant communities who tend to define themselves in relation to religious reference points. These community groups also often seek such recognition and cooperation with public institutions.

The key issue in these tensions and difficulties seems, at a deeper level, to have to do with the legitimacy of certain actors to speak on behalf of the immigrant population as regards integration and social cohesion. The nature of models and values to be transmitted and the type of associations -- whether they be religious, secular, ethnic or 'universal' -- are issues that matter to many institutions in the host country. Accordingly, the existence of a Muslim community structure is regarded with scepticism and often seen to be synonymous with, or even the cause

of, difficulties encountered in the social and cultural integration of the community: questions are raised about the appropriateness of teaching languages from their country of origin, broadcasting television channels from those countries, support for religious education initiatives and so forth.

Given that this issue involves recent immigrants and those who have few qualifications, this situation is also the result of difficulties that Muslim community leaders, who are generally not professionals, face when it comes to social and educational action. Moreover, they are subject to internal divisions between sub-communities, which they usually struggle to manage well.

1. Recognise and form partnerships with Muslim groups in citizenship-related activities

Looking at the integration of Muslim populations from a single perspective focuses on the failure of so-called integration policies: an evaluation that does not take into account changes over time in the communities targeted often leads to biased views of these communities that only serves to increase the impression that integration practices have failed. The lack of open relations therefore serves to strengthen the idea of 'them' and 'us'. People then start to think that the reason for the difficulties lies with the very identity of 'those people', i.e. with the factors that make them what they are where they are at the time of the discussion. The surrounding host population then starts to see immigrants or Muslims as a threat.

Contact with Muslims in Europe would, on the other hand, produce considerably different results, showing how, in their own way, these groups shape their own 'integration' on the basis of their own intentions and values. One of the ways of obtaining such a result is most certainly to mix groups from different backgrounds as much as possible in conjunction with joint objectives.

For example, surely one of the main indicators of this 'integration' is to recognise the fact that the Muslim population is 'appropriating' its new 'European space' and yet the very act of doing so is precisely what threatens the non-Muslim population? Thus, the immigrant community's creation of social structures and meeting places such as halal shops and mosques are the tangible signs of 'appropriation'. Their occupation of space is also evident in the landscape: soundscape (calls to prayer), visual landscape (writings occasionally seen on walls or signs). Appreciating the manner in which an immigrant population invests in its new territory and takes on board its host of new realities is undisputedly an indication of significant psychological integration and, consequently, one of the important areas for the construction of social cohesion between different populations that overcomes their cultural differences. It involves identifying the benefits of this process for all citizens whilst seeking compromises when possible problems arise.

2. Legitimise the needs for close relations and create shared areas

A large immigrant population planning to stay in a community on a long-term basis can explore unexpected avenues for integrating into and appropriating its new social, geographical and cultural space in the host country. It is disrespectful to expect that they will integrate in exactly the same way as previous generations of immigrants and it is just as illusory to imagine that

they will assimilate exactly as the host population would wish, especially since the socioeconomic backdrop changes over time, sometimes being favourable and sometimes causing social exclusion. This expectation, wrong on two accounts, gives rise to frustrations among certain members of the host society, be they decision-makers or citizens.

It is in fact difficult for social actors and European decision-makers to understand and/or accept the needs for close relations and homogeneity of minority groups as legitimate without feeling excluded themselves. A sense of 'feeling at home', however, is what every group hopes for and is precisely what helps to form a group's identity. Often the 'homogeneity' of the 'other' group is matched only by the ignored homogeneity of the host's own group. One of the effects of action to encourage social cohesion must be to legitimise the mutual expectations of close relations and to initiate 'joint areas'.

3. Create areas where different groups can 'rub shoulders'

Divisions, and occasionally dissension, within groups of immigrants - such as different ways of living according to Islam (for example, as practiced by Turks, Moroccans, men and women) - are not always understood and, in certain cases, offend external observers. Yet it must be noted that the perceptible homogeneity within certain groups of immigrants permits, as it were, an internalised heterogeneity for each of the members of these groups, at the cost of apparent ambiguity.

Yet, valuing differences and accepting them sincerely appears to be one of the first criteria for integration. Account must be taken of the fact that cultural minorities descended from immigrant workers expect such a form of recognition that legitimises their settlement in the host country. Thus, it happens that religious associations try to present their faith to others around them, inviting them to share in their festivals or meals. This spirit, occasionally misunderstood, can lead to rejection.

'Liaison spaces' and issues need to be designed to allow different groups to 'rub shoulders' and show solidarity with one another. In turn, the immigrants, and the religious institutions and associations in particular, must pursue efforts to open up more to young people and women, as well as to the entire population and structures in their area within a framework of collective activities. In certain cases, such initiatives could show everyone the usefulness of religious morals or the link between communities in relation to current social objectives such as guaranteeing safety and calm for all, reserving a place for elders in society, offering young people positive values and models of behaviour, showing solidarity with the most disadvantaged or with less developed regions in the world.

The two main democratic principles that must guide all actions are, firstly, 'diversity', i.e. attention accorded to the expression of all points of view and the opportunity for members of minority groups to 'agree to disagree' if need be. Secondly, it involves applying the principle of equality: everything that one group is legally allowed to do must also be possible for any other group.

This is where the role of mediation -- in the broader sense of the term, meaning the role certain active social actors can play as regards immigration and social participation -- takes on its full meaning; it involves actors recognised by the different groups involved in setting up 'encounter' and 'triangulation' areas between different points of view, explaining rules for confrontation and arbitrating between different groups. Such work aimed at linking different groups is undoubtedly required most in areas where the differences are most acute and polarisation is the greatest. Therefore, it is in the strongly structured cultural communities in particular that the need for such a process is most justified. At the very least, this combination of 'possible' and 'desirable' fosters mutual understanding and initiates a dialogue as the first step in a democratic process.

4. Identify players who drive change

Players who drive change and dialogue are key individuals who have direct influence on the development and, above all, the outcome of a project at local level: local politicians, administrators and experts, social and education professionals, economic players, association leaders as well as certain Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. Together, these players must:

- * have carried out diagnostic work on various social and cultural issues, listing both negative and positive aspects;
- * have validated the diagnosis with a large number of parties involved;
- * be able to translate this diagnosis into a community action project;
- * represent one or more of the parties involved validly;
- * accept the legitimacy of all parties present;
- * be sensitive to diversity within the 'camp' they represent;
- * have experience of organising and/or managing community activities;
- * be able to plan and manage action, objectives, an evaluation etc.

Influenced by an immigrant background, involved in social action, occasionally elected by this community, immigrant representatives or those descended from immigrants have first-hand knowledge of immigrants' living conditions and have a communication network at their disposal. Their resources are a valuable tool when it comes to mediation.

An alliance with Muslim families and their associations could serve to defuse potential tensions. It could also help avoid splits. Testimonies of successful examples of cooperation could give everyone confidence. On the contrary, the sometimes violent rejection of community positions and social workers from a foreign background (is it possible to employ a social worker who wears a Muslim headscarf?) risks destroying the effectiveness of an action with a group whose structure has emerged spontaneously. While avoiding polarisation, which contributes little, action with Muslim communities offers the opportunity to emancipate the creative and liberating force of all cultures from their shells of exacerbated identities.

5. Give mediation a chance

Time must be allowed for emotional matters to play out, for emotions are often underestimated in conflict situations. Sufficient time must be allowed to win the confidence of both

representatives from the public authorities and those from the Muslim communities, especially if they are not convinced about the possibility and advantages of entering into dialogue. For the former, the players involved must above all provide reassurance based on expertise, knowledge of the legislative framework and skills as regards intercultural relations. They must document, bring out into the open and defuse their fears and ideas about Islam and the lifestyles of immigrant families, for example. As regards the communities and local associations, winning confidence involves a regular presence, showing empathy, recognising problems encountered on a daily basis, understanding the local framework, Islam and so forth.

As a result, the body facilitating mediation and dialogue must be made up of professionals able to offer information and practical support. This group should contain both Muslims and non-Muslims. If no local associations or 'intermediary' structures exist, public services should set up a partnership between actors in the municipality and association leaders from an immigrant background. Launching a dialogue process and winning the confidence of the actors involved generally takes longer if the actors are not from the area. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the results will last.

It is important that the subject of the mediation is clearly identified by the group as a whole and seeks to respond to problems that concern everyone, such as education and the future of young people. Everyone must be able to find their place as a legitimate and responsible partner in their own role. It appears that progress is facilitated by organising visible public events as well as by the support provided by external institutions that value results. Thus, the partnership can develop positively both in the issues it addresses and as regards its composition aided, if need be, by supervision or methodological support.

6. Conceptualising local-global links ... and vice versa

In the long term, the aim is to set up an official local body to run and observe the way in which the communities live together as well as to relay complaints and so forth. The development of pluriannual programmes would appear to aid development of these types of bodies. Moreover, on a more global level, these local units could join forces and contribute to a system that monitors and provides guidance as regards support for intercultural social interaction, combating uncivil attitudes or sensitive issues between communities with the support of institutions that are specialised in the matter. Thus, a global forum can be used to combat institutional discrimination against Islam more effectively or to better support associations and community life created by immigrants. At national level, for example, symbolic activities could be scheduled, such as days or weeks of dialogue supported by the media. The strategy must be to work with actors who are more or less convinced of the virtues of inter-community dialogue or groups that include both participants who are convinced and those who are not to expand their areas of influence. The time factor must also be taken into account. Projects can be evaluated each year or every two years and must span several years.

7. Breaking through impasses in Muslim communities

Certain impasses are linked to the functioning of Muslim associations themselves. Effecting change takes a long time, something which is not helped by the lack of involvement of Muslim

associations in participatory civic processes. Certain groups find it difficult to understand laws and regulations governing public institutions in Europe. Others find it difficult to accept the fact that regulations on areas such as town planning, health and safety are more important than, and take precedence over, rituals and a sense of the sacred. Certain Muslim immigrant groups lack qualified leaders who are able to speak the host region's language. They also find it difficult to join forces due to different points of view. These observations must be analysed in relation to slow but visible changes in the local leadership of communities. Thus, traditional leaders, rather elderly men who enjoy a certain charisma and prestige within their group, are transferring their community roles to a younger generation that has been educated in Europe, grown up in European society and better understands the ups and downs of local, national and international politics. The role as mobilisers and examples held by community leaders and imams must be valued in order to encourage Muslims to become more involved in civil action in general as citizens concerned by the management of public affairs in dialogue with inhabitants following all philosophies and religions. The creation of Muslim federations and associations at local and supra-local levels must be encouraged.

8. Take practical measures to address people's problems

Experience shows that the issues that appear to be the most problematic at local level are linked to:

- * 'territorialism': disputes between neighbours, noise pollution (e.g. calls to prayer), different uses of space and time (e.g. Ramadan nights), specific use of land (establishment of a mosque, parking at noon on Fridays, cemeteries) and institutions (medical services, swimming pools, sacrifices, halal meat);
- * issues related to the independence of women and family structures: headscarf, authoritarian attitude towards children, education and how young people live (e.g. marriages, combating uncivil remarks);
- * the world of work: employment discrimination, difficulty faced by certain workers in obtaining stable employment and promotions, management of family businesses, racist conflicts between colleagues, processing of faith-related requests in places of work (e.g. prayers or holidays).

It is often a matter of issues related to the visibility of religious diversity in the local public sphere that the majority of the non-Muslim population does not seem ready to accept, especially when current international developments (different types of Islam, terrorism, wars, Turkish membership of the EU) do not help improve the situation. Potential areas of opposition are based on:

- * individual beliefs (fears, suspicions, ignorance, lack of skills, lack of self-confidence);
- * the way in which public institutions operate (legislation on anti-discrimination or the way in which faiths should be dealt with is not applied, complex administrative procedures, lack of common, validated references for 'citizenship', no systematic approach to issues of diversity);
- * the lack of religious/resident/migrant associations or the way in which they operate (e.g. lack of professionalism, difficulties in joining forces).

Consequently, it is advisable to develop actions that aim to foster a range of attitudes among mixed populations and professionals, such as active and open citizenship and new types of civility and solidarity between residents. These attitudes are supported by social skills such as civic and intercultural skills:

- * understanding the significance of changes in society, the world, institutions, cultures and identities (knowledge);
- * desire to take up a position within the process of change (life skills);
- * ability to open up to different points of view and accept new social roles, leave behind fragmented knowledge, black-and-white attitudes and conventional wisdom, take into consideration the heterogeneity of society and culture etc. (know-how).

These initiatives attempt to use dialogue in a bid to find solutions to or to prevent actual local problems raised by cultural diversity. Their strengths are:

- * pleasant, regular meetings at local level (durability);
- * a focus on issues selected together that look at people's daily lives, defend common interests, share collective spaces, involve the pleasure of meeting each other etc.;
- * adopting a method of dialogue led by a group of professionals and based on activities in an area where groups can 'rub shoulders', in other words, space and time invested in a collective project to allow different groups to get to know each other, recognise and support each other giving rise to a request made by citizens or a joint action and, therefore, to a new understanding of discrimination, exclusion or rejection.

The target group concerned by these places can vary: it may involve inhabitants in symmetrical relationships or dissymmetrical groups such as parents and teachers, elected representatives and administrators, employers and workers and so on. Professionals in charge of organising activities, or even with setting up places, are seen as specialists in social and community action or mediators.

9. Identifying common interests that call people to action

Issues that call people to action and encourage them to meet are the common interests shared by residents as users of shared spaces, people seeking support and so forth – unless it is a matter of other types of expectation, such as support for child-rearing, prevention of violence and conflicts. Valuing sociocultural and religious diversity as such is rarely a subject that has strong potential for calling people to action. More pragmatic issues can be more judicious. On the other hand, valuing diversity can quickly be approached as a tool for action: What can religion and secular morals bring to young people who fall prey to urban violence? Is Islam an opportunity for Europe to ask questions about the place of spirituality, diversity or collectiveness in our lives again? Is Europe an opportunity for Islam to ask questions about internal diversity between Muslims and contextuality of practices? How can we jointly combat Islamophobia and anti-Semitism? Via these debates, meetings could allow for local, free expression of cultural amalgams.

10. Final tips - use a rational methodology, but remember to address people's hearts

The method used for intercultural dialogue must fulfil several criteria:

- * be initiated and supported by professionals who in turn are supervised or supported;
- * organise meetings that are gradually able to call groups of 'unconvinced' participants to action and move towards creating permanent forms of dialogue;
- * have an impact due to access to the local press, support from local elected representatives and the production and dissemination of educational tools and events that respond to the questions raised by local groups;
- * be accessible to all, constitute a platform for expression of experiences and valuing people who contribute a particular testimony that needs to be supported by translation if need be;
- * address issues: there should be no taboos, but there should be respect and a democratic approach;
- * offer high-quality, accessible academic information provided by competent experts from different backgrounds when requested;
- * rather than encouraging people to find out about Islam, encourage them to get to know Muslims in their area that they can live alongside, share things with and with whom they can take action;
- * use mediation, negotiation and collective resolution techniques to solve problems, reach compromises and coach those involved;
- * offer structured training if necessary;
- * include a democratic and formative methodology for evaluation to guide action.

However, in the field of intercultural relations, suspicion and rejection are often the source of irrational fears. For example, for anyone who wants to develop direct contact and dialogue between different groups in society at local level, it is of utmost priority to address 'the heart', the emotions. This involves promoting face-to-face actions and a process that allows people to trust each other. Prejudices and stereotypes must be banished. A simple example could be to adopt a slogan such as 'A Muslim friend for every non-Muslim and vice versa'. As for the more intellectual questions, room must be left to allow them to be raised. However, they should only be responded to if the request will be effective. The task, therefore, will be to allow contacts to develop between groups whilst trying to respect minimum conditions and conditions on knowledge about each other:

- * the status of each group must be defined as equal;
- * social standards adopted must encourage egalitarian contact;
- * the situation must foster interdependence between groups to achieve common objectives;
- * organisation of activities must offer a high knowledge potential;
- * the attributes of the groups present must be such as to show that stereotypes are not true.

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Notes

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2 This document targets both men and women; the masculine form is simply used for convenience.

3 Research action on 'Faiths and social cohesion'

4 Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

5 Available at www.irfam.org or www.harmattan.fr.

Summary

The recommendations of this article are drawn from an international initiative developed between 2001 and 2004 by the Institute for Research, Training and Action on Migration (IRFAM) as part of the European Commission's programme to combat discrimination and promote social rights. Local action and observation provide practical expertise on the most effective methods for preventing situations from reaching an impasse, or for overcoming an impasse if it does occur. This document does not contain any 'magic formulas' that can be used everywhere and in every situation. Nonetheless, it aims to inspire readers by offering an ethical and pragmatic view of intercommunity dialogue as a tool for managing problematic situations. It identifies pertinent examples of dialogue, intercultural mediation, information dissemination, awareness-raising, involvement, meeting, consultation and collaboration practices involving people from all backgrounds with a view to strengthening Europe's democracies at local level through the cultural and spiritual enrichment of all whilst respecting human rights. When it comes to relations with Muslim communities in Europe, local dialogue action means establishing channels for real communication between local decision-makers/actors and the communities/associations concerned for the purpose of arbitration and mediation focussing on jointly identified expectations and problems. While intercultural dialogue with Muslims is more than just a dialogue between faiths or communities, it must also be possible to address issues relating to religion and any form of spirituality.