

“Making diversity work for cities”

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Lord Mayor

Ministers,
Director General,
Mayors,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's event is unique in several ways.

It is unique first of all from an institutional point of view. For the first time an event of the “Intercultural Cities” programme is being held under the auspices of both the Irish Presidency of the European Council, and the Andorran Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. This is a sure sign of the importance of the issues to discuss, and of the solid partnership between the two European institutions in the field of intercultural dialogue.

This event is unique also because we will be exposing for the first time the validity of the concept of the “Intercultural Cities” to the critical scrutiny of an audience as large, diverse and distinguished as the one we have here today. In the past we have tried and tested the concept, like in a laboratory, with a group of pioneering cities. Now we are confident that it is robust and adaptable enough to flourish in all sorts of climate. We realised that this delicate plant can grow roots in the cold winds of the North, the fertile plains of the East, the scorching valleys of the South and on the British and Irish shores. “Intercultural Cities” are to be found everywhere in Europe, and indeed much farther than this in Mexico, Canada, the United States and Japan.

Our approach of intercultural integration is adopted in all kinds of countries and places, it has a universal appeal. But do the leaders of all “Intercultural Cities” share the same understanding of the intercultural challenges? Do they adopt the same practical approaches? What can they learn from each other? How can we spread the concept even more widely across Europe — and beyond?

These are the challenges for this event. There is probably no better place to discuss these issues than Dublin. Not only because Dublin has its own unique brand of interculturality – we call it “organic interculturality” – , because most people here seem to grasp the notion intuitively and are very open to cultural hybridization. But also because Ireland is the symbolic bridge between Europe and the Americas, where the “Intercultural Cities” ideas are raising more and more interest.

However, let me at this point say a couple of words about the concept of “intercultural integration”, how it came about, and what it stands for.

Learning to live together in diversity is one of the most acute challenges for our societies at present – a challenge that the Council of Europe has been one of the first to address. As the guardian of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, we are painfully aware that in several of our 47 member states the public debate about migration, minorities and integration currently becomes more and more acrimonious and divisive. We risk eroding the fundamental values and principles that underpin our identity as Europeans. This is why the Council of Europe, together with the European Commission, initiated the “Intercultural Cities” pilot programme: to propose a new policy paradigm, a new way of thinking about migration, integration and diversity.

When we define policies, in order to ensure consistency and credibility we always need to start from first principles. In relation to diversity, we realised that combatting discrimination is essential. But that is not enough; we also need to ensure that all members of our societies can live in equal dignity and have fair and equal opportunities. If we want to effectively safeguard human rights for all, we need to fight against any form of discrimination; but if we want to ensure the equal dignity and equal opportunities for all, we need to do more. And we can do more if we realise that growing diversity is an asset, not a liability.

We usually discuss this under the title of “diversity advantage”. In a nutshell, the principle of “diversity advantage” tells us that we are in a real win-win situation if we design policies and institutions in such a way that migrants are not treated as a threat that needs to be kept on the margins of society, but as a rich resource for social, economic and cultural development. In order to effectively realise the “diversity advantage” in theory and practice, we need openness, inclusion, empowerment and intercultural competence that allows us to manage the inevitable consequences of living in diversity.

This is a challenge. Our social systems are made to respond to need, not to look for the talent and unique experience behind the distress of a migrant or a refugee. Our schools are in many cases tailored to the learning skills and the independence of middle-class children. They are not meant to address entire families as units of learning. Also, the institutions of representative democracy presuppose voters who trust the state as a benevolent force; they are not necessarily adapted to those citizens who – or whose parents – have been socialised in the context of dictatorships and civil wars, where the state is perceived as alienated – if not an enemy – to its citizens.

However, in order to benefit from the “diversity advantage” we cannot afford to ignore all these voters, workers and learners. We need to find new and creative ways of involving them, giving them the opportunity to learn, work and contribute to the life of society.

The policy pursuing the “diversity advantage” does not imply diluting our values or lowering our standards. Neither does it relieve us of the necessity to democratically manage the international migration flows, or to address the specific problems of asylum-seekers in full respect of human rights.

The business community, which has often been the first to open up to the diversity of talents, teaches us a lesson. Empirical studies show that managers of culturally diverse teams perform better than managers of homogeneous teams; they are challenged to adapt their approach to different sensitivities, to be explicit about their expectations, to discuss and negotiate rather than taking things for granted. They simply become better managers. Why would this not apply also to democratic leaders? Should we not expect also that democratic leadership will improve if the society is more diverse? Should we not work for this to happen?

Our partners within the “Intercultural Cities” programme understand that it is not enough to believe in the “diversity advantage”; one also needs to realise this advantage in practice. One needs to be prepared to work with public opinion, to show real leadership and to skilfully employ social pedagogy. One needs to speak up against voices that portray migrants as a threat to community cohesion. And one needs to invest in organisations and institutions that foster interaction. Only then will the benefits of diversity be broadly understood and accepted.

We at the Council of Europe are proud that in just five years we have been able to define a solid concept of intercultural integration, encourage partner cities to translate it into policy strategies, and devise tools for policy review and impact assessment. We have met an increasingly strong interest in the “Intercultural Cities” programme, with cities across Europe and indeed around the world wishing to join the coalition and to adopt the intercultural integration approach to managing urban diversity. Today’s event is a case in point – we had to turn away many interested city managers and experts, so strong was the demand for participation.

This brings me to the third reason why this event is unique. For the first time we are able to bring together leaders from four continents that have embraced the “Intercultural Cities” approach, and are using it or promoting it in their daily work.

We are delighted to have such a diverse, competent and committed group at this event. This is a marvellous opportunity to learn, to listen, to network and interact, throughout the sessions and in the evenings.

The programme still is, and will always be, work in progress. I recently had the opportunity to visit Berlin Neukölln, one of the programme cities. During our frank exchange of views with local officials clearly emerged the message that we still need to work hard to effectively address the real challenges of cultural diversity; that we need to work hard to demonstrate the added value of the programme and to address its limitations. This conference is a valuable opportunity to take the programme further. With your commitment, your contributions, we can make intercultural integration even more relevant for the diverse cities of the future.

One of the advisers to UEFA President Michel Platini once said that football became the exciting show that we know today when teams started bringing in players from many different countries. Instead of sticking to rigid rules, they had to become flexible, forging a team out of very different styles and temperaments. They still play within the rules, but with added creativity and flair.

The same is true for the society around us. It is up to us, up to you, to build and coach the teams that can make our cities the driving force of the age of diversity.

Thank you.