

Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue

Calling for broad mobilisation

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The Platform is an initiative that brings together organisations from many policy sectors in order to share effective intercultural dialogue practices and to engage with the political process under the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 and beyond.

Context

Contemporary developments related to globalisation, EU enlargement, migration, and trans-national mobility mean that we need to exercise our capacity for change constantly. Massively increasing cross-cultural encounters affect our societies in such a way that differences are more intensely experienced. These developments provide a unique opportunity for enriching transformation processes of individuals, communities, and society as a whole. However, the changing nature of our societies is also frightening to many. Hence, new policies are called for that allow for positive experiences of diversity and for intercultural dialogue to be fostered. An inclusive environment, and new avenues of dialogue and cooperation need to be created in which the different stakeholders have their equal say, citizens can fully participate in decision-making processes, and confront each others' expectations of living together in mutual respect. Culture and the arts have a distinct and creative role to play in imagining the common good.

Intercultural dialogue has become the buzzword, notably since the announcement of a European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008. However, the issues at stake are too broad, complex, and multi-faceted for "a quick-fix", especially within one year. European institutions, national governments, local authorities, the business sector and independent NGOs – notably cultural actors – are struggling with Europe's changing face and are in need of new insights and approaches, as much in terms of policies as practices.

Rationale of the Platform

Intercultural dialogue is a means through which individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds engage in an open and respectful exchange of views, share experiences, and ultimately develop a better understanding of each others' aspirations and practices of living together. Political measures aiming at intercultural dialogue can also be seen as strategic instruments to promote cultural diversity, cooperation and facilitate social cohesion on the basis of human rights, solidarity and fairness.

However, practitioners often feel alienated from political discourses and divisions. The Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue is a response to this dilemma. It is an initiative of the cultural sector and involves stakeholders across policy areas in an alliance to make intercultural dialogue a 'lived priority' of the European project and a political goal of the institutions and civil society. As a political multi-stakeholder alliance and campaign, it overcomes fragmentation and with concrete

actions, it brings life to a somewhat vague concept, particularly through exploring the power of culture in the societal fabric.

Democracy at the centre

Launched at the end of 2006, as a joint kick-off of the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) and the European Forum for the Arts and Heritage (EFAH), the Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue today brings together more than 80 European and national organisations from the fields of arts and culture, youth and social affairs, education and life-long learning, human rights, anti-racism and minority rights. What unites them is the drive to learn from each other's effective practices of intercultural dialogue and cooperation, to explore possible cross-fertilisation and synergies between projects and sectors, and above all to engage vigorously in a political process.

The Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue is a democracy-building exercise at European level, initiated by the cultural sector at large, and a very first attempt to engage multipliers across sectors and borders in a subject that concerns us all equally: How can Europe's increasing heterogeneity and diversity become recognised and fostered as a capital asset? How can we make the most of the richness of cultural diversity? How can we compare and share our contrasting intercultural experiences most constructively?

European networks are fantastic access channels to millions of citizens but often they lack the means to use their potential fully. The Platform aims at mobilising the networks' membership, at facilitating this process and at delivering concrete outputs. The Civil Society Platform brings together and unites not only to share and learn from each other but also to deliver concerted policy proposals addressing European, national and local decision-makers, as well as foundations and others actors of civil society. The wealth of concrete projects of its constituency supports its advocacy and will be exposed in part at major events across Europe throughout 2008 and beyond.

Practice-based policies

Among the tasks of the Civil Society Platform are the collection and analysis of knowledge and practices of intercultural dialogue so as to be able to produce robust policy recommendations. Issues that have already been taken up by the Civil Society Platform include: international mobility and intercultural competence, intercultural management and governance of NGOs; intercultural dialogue through participatory artistic practice, and intercultural dialogue mediated by consumable cultural goods.

In 2007, the Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue will already have identified areas of engagement or thematic interests overlapping between the different policy sectors. It will also have produced a series of policy recommendations addressing the public, private and third sectors. This draft Platform paper, built on extensive consultation of civil society, will be ready for presentation at the opening of the 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, within Slovenia's Presidency of the EU.

Throughout 2008, the Platform will campaign with partners across Europe to make a bold contribution to the Year whilst monitoring the implementation of the Year. The results of the consultation and monitoring process should pave the way for adapted policies and support instruments to be put in place in 2009.

Standard setting and monitoring

The mobilisation of thousands of actors on the theme of intercultural dialogue will give visibility to already existing successful practices but also help the definition of diversity policies and the setting of standards of intercultural dialogue. The monitoring at European and national levels will be the litmus test for the years to come. The question will then be: who is best placed to monitor the implementation of cross-sector diversity policies and effective intercultural practices? The European Commission? The Council of Europe? Building on its contribution to standard setting, the Civil Society Platform should play a role as 'watch-dog' and monitor progress and shortcomings. The Platform should broaden and deepen the civil society participation in EU- and national policy-making on intercultural dialogue beyond 2008 (i.e. monitoring at European level and involvement in national action plans).

Challenges

The creation of the Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue reflects the NGOs' growing engagement within the EU and national policy area. Through the facilitation of an open framework of participation, the Platform allows empowerment of civil society actors and provides political institutions with a new organised interlocutor. However, given that its financial resources are modest in respect of its ambitions the Platform deserves structural support for its work.

Institutional relationships

The Platform for Intercultural Dialogue has been much welcomed by the European Commission, notably in its recent Communication on Culture (10 May 2007) which seeks to set the agenda for the EU's first-ever 'Strategy for Culture' (with intercultural dialogue as one of three key areas) building on enhanced consultation with civil society. The Platform's participation in the Commission's steering committee for the year is one step in this direction. The Council of Europe is consulting the Platform, as well, notably with respect to its White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (to be released in November 2007).

NEF (Network of European Foundations) is supporting the initiative recognising the strong mobilisation potential of the Platform and wishing to channel the wealth of experiences of foundations regarding civil society and intercultural dialogue.

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