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# Institutional perspective on ICD: Council of Europe

## Cherish diversity, don't fear your neighbour

**“Intercultural dialogue” has become one of the buzzwords of international politics. Expectations run high: intercultural dialogue is widely seen as the preventive medicine against inter-community conflict; as the political answer to the fears triggered by cultural diversity; as an antidote against social fragmentation, stereotyping, racism and discrimination.**

Undoubtedly, the nature of cultural diversity – and our awareness of it – has changed profoundly over the last two decades. There is the increasing internal diversity of European societies in the wake of strong migration movements caused by the economic globalization and the political upheavals prompted by the fall of the Berlin Wall. There is the increasing perception of international conflicts as conflicts between different cultural value systems. The revolution of transportation and the communication media facilitates intercultural exposure and contact. In the face of globalization and the European integration process, cultural minorities (and majorities) demand more forcefully than in the past, the recognition of their identity.

### ► So, what can intercultural dialogue achieve?

The term «intercultural dialogue» appeared widely in the political debate in the 1990's. In spite of its lack of conceptual clarity, the term gradually made its way into the political vocabulary and in 1995 emerged for the first time in an international legal instrument – the Council of Europe “Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities”. At world level, the United Nations declared 2001 the “International Year of Dialogue of Civilisations”.

As regards the Council of Europe, stimulating the interaction between cultures has been one of its tasks right from the beginning, long before the term “intercultural dialogue” appeared in international politics. The groundbreaking European Cultural Convention of 1954, which has been signed by 49 states so far, did nothing else other than to encourage dialogue and co-operation across borders.

However, priorities and concepts have changed over the last 50 years in line with political developments. To simplify just a

little, one could say that the Council of Europe followed the international trend: from international cultural co-operation as a means of post-conflict reconciliation, to intercultural education as a contribution towards peace in a divided world, to the social integration of migrants and the protection of minorities, to social cohesion and human rights in multicultural societies. In 2005, the member states of the Council of Europe made intercultural dialogue a political priority of the Organization.

In formulating its strategy for the promotion of intercultural dialogue (the “Faro Strategy”), the Council of Europe set down four ground rules:

- Every policy for the promotion of intercultural dialogue must be transversal in nature, i.e. it cannot be pursued as a sectoral policy independent from other policy areas, but must overarch and include these. To name just one example, intercultural dialogue without an immigration and security policy and practice respecting human and minority rights, and without guaranteeing everybody involved the fulfilment of their basic material needs, will surely fail.
- Intercultural dialogue is the task of the state and public authorities, certainly, but it can be advanced only in co-operation with civil society: it will be successful only if as many people as possible are ready – and acquire the necessary skills – to master the cultural variety of our environment productively.
- Understanding another culture is not equivalent to approving and accepting all of its values and practices. For the Council of Europe, this implies that the protection of human rights, the strengthening of democracy and the rule of law are essentials that cannot be compromised in the process of intercultural dialogue. Intercultural dialogue does not mean value relativism.

- Intercultural dialogue is a task that cannot be tackled within the borders of our continent alone. Cultures are interconnected at world level.

Since 2005, the discussion has focused on the question of how to implement and mainstream this strategy. Many models and modules exist already, including legal standards, monitoring mechanisms, school curricula, guidelines for police and law officials, recommendations to the media, guidelines for the work of local and regional authorities, and the educational tools developed in the Council of Europe youth sector during its long-standing work in favour of tolerance, diversity and human rights.

In 2008, the Council of Europe will publish a basic political text – a «White Paper» – on intercultural dialogue, in order to add further strength to the political debate, to develop the inner coherence of our policy, and to encourage others and ourselves to make a long-term commitment in favour of intercultural dialogue. The document will offer recommendations and guidelines for all stakeholders, and promote the many existing examples of successful practice.

In preparing the White Paper, the Council of Europe has adopted a new approach. 2007 was used for intensive consultations with as many “stakeholders” as possible – governments, parliaments, towns and regional authorities, civil society organisations, minority and migrants’ initiatives, women’s federations, cultural organisations, journalists and many others.

Youth organisations were involved in this consultation at various steps. The “Diversity Youth Forum”, organised in October 2006, was a first occasion to discuss the threats to diversity that young people experience today, and the responses that European institutions, national political authorities and civil society organisations must give in order to make our continent a space where cultural diversity is promoted and protected, not feared. In the “Istanbul Youth Declaration” on interreligious and intercultural dialogue in youth work (March 2007), youth organisations reiterated their commitment to the indivisible, inalienable and universal human rights as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and made numerous suggestions about how to take this policy further. The statutory organs of the Council of Europe youth sector expressed themselves on several occasions on the priorities they wished to see in the White Paper.

The White Paper will take account of these views and suggestions, in order to lay the basis for a widely co-ordinated and broad-based policy for the promotion of the intercultural dialogue. Five areas of action emerged during the consultations, and they will form the core messages of the White Paper:

- Europe must improve the democratic governance of cultural diversity. This relates to the legal framework and the standards of law enforcement, but also the political culture of our societies. Issues at hand are all forms of discrimination, hate

speech against minorities and many more.

- Europe must strengthen its efforts to enable everyone not only to know more about other cultures, but also to develop the co-operative skills necessary for living in a culturally diverse environment. Education in all contexts, including non-formal and informal education through civil society organisations and the media, is a particularly important aspect.

- Europe must develop the structures and opportunities for the participation of all, and for democratic citizenship. This implies for instance a more vigorous strategy to offer citizenship to all, but also a stronger encouragement and empowerment of minorities to engage themselves in the democratic dialogue.

- Europe needs more and better spaces for intercultural dialogue. The media, civil society organisations and religious communities are among the actors who can contribute most in this respect.

- The principles of intercultural dialogue must also inspire relationships at international level.

The White Paper is expected to launch a widespread debate on practical policies at all levels. This is where youth organisations, and young people generally, will have an important role to play. We can take intercultural dialogue much further – but only if Europe’s young generation shares the basic conviction that diversity makes us richer, not poorer: That the essence of diversity is the protection of the human rights of everybody: That the future of Europe lies in our ability to listen and to learn from each other – in dialogue and respect.

The framework for action in 2008 and beyond is already prepared. The Council of Europe’s White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue will mark the starting point of numerous programmes and projects, to be implemented over several years within the Organization, nationally and locally. At UN level, the new «Alliance of Civilizations» initiative is about to enter its operational phase. The European Union prepares for 2008 the «European Year of the Intercultural Dialogue». These are ample opportunities for all of us to learn to cherish diversity, and not to fear our neighbours.

**Notes and references :** ✕

- For more information on the Directorate General of Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport, visit the website: [www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural\\_Co-operation/](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/)

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