

Building Trust in Diversity – Universities and Cities Joining Forces

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On May 12-13, 2015 the University of Oslo, Norway, cooperating with the Intercultural Cities Network of the Council of Europe played host to academics and urban activists from all over Europe gathered for a conference around the motto: Cities need universities as partners in developing and delivering intercultural strategies. The invitation stressed the urgent need to build forward looking partnerships in times of growing tensions and conflicts in urban areas all over the world: “Universities serve a crucial function in delivering a robust knowledge base in the face of extremism, xenophobia and hate speech.”

The research base for developing the European Intercultural Cities Network is clearly stated in the statutes: “This approach is based on the understanding, supported by a wealth of research that diversity can be a resource for the development of cities, if managed properly. A city can minimize the threats and maximize the potential of diversity by designing and implementing a comprehensive strategy to manage diversity as a resource.”

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“Intercultural cities is a capacity - building program which supports cities in developing, implementing and evaluating local diversity and inclusion strategies.”

- Foster a sense of pluralistic identity based on the pride and appreciation of its diverse population and minimize ethnic tension and conflict.
- Set up a governance model empowering all members of the community, regardless of their origin or status, and thus benefit from their talents, skills and links with developing markets.
- Break the walls between ethnic groups, build trust and thus ensure cohesion and solidarity.
- Make the public space and services accessible to all and end the vicious circle of poverty and exclusion which goes hand in hand with ethnic segregation.
- Empower intercultural innovators in public institutions and civil society and through them ensure that policies encourage intercultural interaction.
- Build a positive discourse and encourage a balanced approach to diversity in media to foster positive public perception of migrant and minority groups.

At the opening session Phil Woods, Advisor to the Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities program cited some of the research findings that had led to the introduction of the program: Corporate organizations with an intercultural workforce found an average increase in productivity of 30%. Inge Jan Henjesand, President of the Norwegian School of Business connected the Intercultural Cities program to the search for talent and the rise of the creative class. A diverse workplace requires a flat organizational management and open communication built on trust in order for the production to be cost effective and reach the desired level of innovation.

Main questions poised were: How do we reengage the University with civic society? How can urban research contribute to municipal policies? Limerick, one of the Intercultural Cities this year concludes its “Pioneering and Connected” plan directly aimed at public problem solving. The research program includes a “Hate and Hostility” research group. It becomes clear that some research projects are highly sensitive dealing with difficult issues, and requiring a carefully planned common venture and involving “neutral” partners.

However if we want our research to lead to diversity advantage practices our facts must be disseminated and shared with all stakeholders, particularly the policy decision makers at the city councils and the general public. Our media channels must be able to disseminate the “hard facts” in a comprehensible language. In previous volumes our Journal has aimed at giving a comprehensive assessment of the movement to build creative cities. In view of the new pressure on our growing cities it becomes paramount for urban managers to deal with diversity. Will it be a threat, a nuisance – or an opportunity? All indications are that creative cities will form the backbone of all future urban development but that creative cities need diversity to have vibrancy and profit from the energy of the new citizen groups. Following this development regionally within ASEAN and internationally will be a major aim for our editorial policy and practice.