

# Intercultural Dialogue and the Platform for Intercultural Europe

## Background note prepared by Culture Action Europe

### 1. Policy background: What is Intercultural Dialogue?

The Platform for Intercultural Europe's definition of Intercultural Dialogue is perhaps the most programmatic definition of the term to date:

*"a series of specific encounters, anchored in real space and time between individuals and/or groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, with the aim of exploring, testing and increasing understanding, awareness, empathy, and respect. The ultimate purpose of Intercultural Dialogue is to create a cooperative and willing environment for overcoming political and social tensions".* (Definition from Rainbow Paper I),

but it still stands beside many other, sometime very broad understandings. The term Intercultural Dialogue also stands in a line of other terms, which represent different stages or different camps in the thinking and debate on dealing with cultural diversity, such as multiculturalism, social cohesion and assimilation. Noteworthy is the terminology used by the Council of Europe in its White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, which states:

*'Intercultural Dialogue is understood as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage'.*

#### Terms from the same field of debate include:

**Assimilation:** advocates the adoption by immigrant or ethnic communities of the prevailing ethos of the host nation, and an ongoing process of socialisation into the commonly accepted national rituals of identity.

**Multiculturalism:** multiculturalism advocates the explicit recognition of minority rights and cultures within the framework of a majority culture. Believed by some to lead to community fragmentation and isolation, and by others to community diversity and independence. A much discussed and contested view of community development.

**Cultural pluralism:** is a term used when small groups within a larger society maintain their unique cultural identities. In a pluralist culture, unique groups not only coexist side by side, but also consider qualities of other groups as traits worth having in the dominant culture. Cultural Pluralism often implies a degree of *cultural relativism* (i.e. an unease with making value judgments about cultural practices).

The distinctive elements and characteristics of Intercultural Dialogue might be said to include:

- The privileging of dialogue
- The belief in an overarching civic identity that embraces cultural characteristics

- A respect for certain basic elements of liberal democracy (see below)
- A respect for difference
- A policy and practice approach (i.e. a focus on skill sets and language)

#### Five policy approaches

The Council of Europe White Paper states that the objective is ; *'A more active, a better-structured and more widely shared effort in managing cultural diversity'*. Intercultural Dialogue in this context is seen as a tool kit to *manage* culture, and cultural diversity as a kind of glue to bind the continent's communities together.

The five suggested policy approaches are:

##### 1. Developing Democratic governance

This refers to building a governance structure that safeguards human rights and promotes pluralism and tolerance through education, public administrations, legal structures, culture and media.

##### 2. Strengthening democratic citizenship and participation

Citizenship and strengthening democratic participation is a key issue for the Council of Europe, which implies a right and responsibility to participate in the life of the community.

##### 3. Learning and teaching intercultural competences

These include citizenship skills, plurilingual skills, social commitment, solidarity skills, cultural sensitivity and broad learning resources.

##### 4. Creating space for intercultural dialogue

A plea is made for more non-threatening places to be developed for dialogue, claiming that successful intercultural governance depends on animating such spaces. This is an area with special relevance to town planning, the role of universities and schools, creativity and the arts, museum and heritage sites etc.

##### 5. Developing intercultural dialogue in international relations

The paper stresses the role of Intercultural Dialogue in promoting Europe both bilaterally and multilaterally. The Council of Europe sees this as being relevant to institutional actors, civil society and individuals who work across borders.

### 2. The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue

The decision no 1983/2006/ec of the European Parliament and of the EU Council of 18 December 2006 established the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. It makes express reference to *'increasing interactions between European citizens, and all those living in the EU, and the various cultures, languages, ethnic groups and religions in Europe*

and beyond'.

The institutional approach is very practical and very aware of the issues of subsidiarity; the text is instrumental, and cites economic, political, educational and innovation advantages to be derived from Intercultural Dialogue. The year aims to promote Intercultural Dialogue and to raise general awareness of the importance of developing an 'active European citizenship'. The key messages are targeted at young people but also the disadvantaged. Civil Society is in general encouraged to mobilise and get involved. Each Member State has a national coordinating body, and the Platform for Intercultural Europe is a recognised partner of civil society at EU level.

The budget for the year is 10 million, which focuses on 7 flagship projects, the co-financing of a number of national projects, an information and awareness raising campaign and finally evaluation. For further information on the year please consult: [www.dialogue2008.eu](http://www.dialogue2008.eu)

### National strategies for ICD

The year required the EU Member States to nominate a national coordination body 'responsible for organising that Member State's participation in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue' (see article 4). All member countries have elaborated their national strategies for the Year. The strategies with the most detailed programmes show evidence of previous 'experience' with a 'tradition' of policies and initiatives as well as an institutional and organisational infrastructure to support them. For others, (Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, French community of Belgium, Malta), the strategies show how national policies are beginning to take into account the issues (migration, asylum, cultural diversity, integration, tolerance, minority languages, social cohesion, equal opportunities...).

One of the most frequently mentioned challenges is that of translating intercultural dialogue from theory into practice. The priority fields are the arts, education, social affairs, immigration, minorities, anti-racism, human rights, religious affairs, youth, sports. A common characteristic of all national priorities are activities targeting young people through educational activities (both at a formal and an informal level). The national documents tend to refer to most of their initiatives for the Year as sustainable beyond 2008. However, there are very few practical concrete examples, other than preserving the website of the Year as a tool for continuing and further enhancing dialogue, and embedding an intercultural dialogue dimension in school curricula and in big cultural events of the festival type.

Finally, it is interesting to note that none of the strategies provide explicit definitions of intercultural dialogue. One quite common error occurs when the concept is used as a perfect synonym of 'multicultural' and 'cultural pluralism'. Very interestingly, some national strategies refer to the

2009 Year of Innovation and Creativity and connect the three years as part of a global policy (Austria, Slovakia). Connection is also emphasised with the European capitals of culture by the countries that will host them (Liverpool 2008, Vilnius 2009, Pécs 2010).

### 3. The Platform for Intercultural Europe

The Platform for Intercultural Europe was set up as the Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue in 2006 by the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) and the European Forum for the Arts and Heritage (EFAH - now Culture Action Europe) with the support of the Network of European Foundations (NEF), on the occasion of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008. It was set up to bring together organisations from different civil society policy sectors to 'share effective Intercultural Dialogue practices and to engage with the political process under the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 and beyond'. Over 200 civil society organisations (local, national and European) participated in this process, articulated around meetings, consultations, retreat workshops and a multi-stage drafting process of a policy paper. Organisations can now sign up to "The Rainbow Paper. Intercultural Dialogue: from Practice to Policy and back" (<http://rainbowpaper.labforculture.org>), and thereby commit to the call for action and advocacy at the European level. The Platform itself has now been formally established.

#### Mission and approach

The Platform's core principle is firmly one of cross-sectoral engagement, to bring people together from the fields of culture, education, youth and social work, work on minority rights, on anti-discrimination and human rights. The Platform aims to contribute to four levels of change in Europe.

Attitudinal – leading to an appreciation of diversity and the complexity of identities

Social – working towards democratic inclusion and greater equity

Structural - building capacities for change within organisations and constituencies

Policy changes – working for change at all levels

The Platform maintains that our intercultural experience needs to have three elements: Dialogue, Competence and Action. Based on these it proposes 5 steps from intercultural challenges to interculturalism.

- Dialogue in that they commit to rally behind the following understanding of Intercultural Dialogue: "a series of specific encounters, anchored in real space and time between individuals and/or groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, with the aim of exploring, testing and increasing understanding, awareness, empathy, and respect. The ultimate purpose of Intercultural Dialogue is to create a cooperative and willing environment for overcoming political and social tensions". (Definition from Rainbow Paper I).

- Competence in that the association believes that real human encounters to be at the heart of Intercultural Dialogue and that these people need to be equipped with skills for such a coming together
- Action in that the signatories state their commitment to value intercultural action: living, working and creating together.

Migration and minorities remain at the heart of the paper and the platform, as from the very start, but adds in issues of religious and intergenerational dialogue. The platform recognises Intercultural Dialogue as a necessary pursuit at all levels, from the local to the international, between European countries and between Europe and the rest of the world, but focuses on the need to compare how cultural diversity is being tackled locally.

The Rainbow Paper's key recommendations are captured in five categories:

1. Education, (especially pre-school and countering segregation, but also the recognition of informal intercultural education through the arts and the media),
2. Capacity building for intercultural dialogue by organisations (both public, civic and commercial),
3. Creating an effective learning cycle

between practice and policy (through systematically collected and networked data collection),

4. The creation of collaborative links across sectors and policy areas, and
5. Adequate resourcing of actions to encourage Intercultural Dialogue.

The paper stresses that practical engagement is more effective than debates. Most issues, from the resolution of violent conflicts to environmental protection to public health, are more successfully advanced by taking cultural differences into account, and by engaging constructively with diversity as a resource.

### **Work programme**

The new association, the Platform for Intercultural Europe has just been set up (1<sup>st</sup> October 2008) and the work programme for 2008 – 2010 is currently being finalized. Further information on the platform and its work is available at: <http://www.intercultural-europe.org>