

## **Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue**

### **Calling for broad mobilisation**

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. Cross-cultural encounters are dramatically on the increase, with the effect on our societies that differences are more intensely experienced. Such developments provide a unique opportunity to enrich the transformation processes of individuals, communities, and society as a whole.

However, the changing nature of our societies is also frightening to many people. This is why we need new policies that allow for positive experiences of diversity and that enable intercultural dialogue to take place. An inclusive environment, with new avenues of dialogue and cooperation, needs to be created. In such an environment the different stakeholders would have an equal say, and citizens could fully participate in decision-making processes and (by confronting each others' expectations) learn what it would take to live 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 phrase of the moment, especially since the announcement that 2008 will be the 'European Year of Intercultural Dialogue'. The issues at stake, however, are too broad and complex for 'a quick fix', especially within one year. New insights and approaches – as much in relation to policies as practice – are needed by European institutions, national governments, local authorities, the business sector and independent NGOs (notably cultural actors) as they struggle to come to terms with Europe's changing face.

#### **Rationale of the Platform**

Intercultural dialogue is a means by 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 designed to engender intercultural dialogue can be seen as strategic instruments to promote cultural diversity and cooperation and also 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. An initiative of the cultural sector, it involves stakeholders across policy areas in an alliance that aims to make intercultural dialogue a 'lived priority' of the European project and a political goal of the institutions and civil society. Its status as a political multi-stakeholder alliance and campaign helps to overcome fragmentation, while the

concrete actions it takes – particularly in exploring the power of culture in the societal fabric – brings an otherwise rather vague concept to life.

### **Democracy at the centre**

Launched jointly by the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) and the European Forum for the Arts and Heritage (EFAH) at the end of 2006, 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 lifelong 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, and 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 and a very first attempt to engage multipliers across sectors and borders in cultural diversity issues that concern us all equally. The issues may be summarised as three key questions: 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 excellent access channels to millions of citizens, but often these networks lack the means to use their potential fully. The Platform seeks to mobilise the networks' membership and deliver concrete outputs. Sharing and learning are only part of the Platform's function: it will also deliver concerted policy proposals aimed at European, national and local decision-makers, as well as foundations and others actors of civil society. The Platform's large and varied constituency means that it has a wealth of concrete projects to support its advocacy, as will be seen at major events across Europe throughout 2008 and beyond.

### **Practice-based policies**

The Civil Society Platform will collect and analyse 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 common to the different policy sectors. It will also have produced a series of policy recommendations addressing the public, private and third sectors. Based on extensive consultation with civil society, this draft Platform paper 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 while monitoring the implementation of the Year's aims. 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 existing successful practices but also help to define diversity policies and set 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 'watchdog' role, monitoring progress and shortcomings. The Platform should broaden and deepen civil society participation in EU and national policymaking on intercultural dialogue beyond 2008 (i.e. monitoring at European level and involvement in national action plans).

### **Challenges**

The creation of the Platform indicates the growing engagement of NGOs with the area of policy at EU and national levels. By facilitating an open framework of participation, the Platform empowers civil society actors and provides political institutions with a new organised interlocutor. However, given that its financial resources are modest in relation to 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, building on enhanced consultation with civil society, seeks to set the agenda for the EU's first-ever 'strategy for culture' (with intercultural dialogue as one of the three key areas). The Platform's presence on the Commission's steering committee for 2008 is a further example of such consultation. The Council of Europe is also consulting the Platform, particularly with respect to its White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (to be released in November 2007).

A supporter of the initiative, NEF (Network of European Foundations) recognises the Platform's strong potential for mobilisation. It also sees the Platform as a positive means for channelling the wealth of experience accumulated by foundations in the areas of civil society and intercultural dialogue.

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