

Towards Mainstreaming Principles of Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue in Policies for Sustainable Development

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To mark World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, proclaimed in 2003 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, an international expert meeting entitled “Mainstreaming Principles of Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue in Policies for Sustainable Development” was held from 21 to 23 May 2007 at UNESCO Headquarters. The meeting was organized by the Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue of UNESCO jointly and with the support of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO). The meeting was attended by around 40 experts from the academic community, and by representatives of intergovernmental organizations. The participants were invited to formulate recommendations on how to mainstream principles of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue into policies and activities for mutual understanding, crucial to the construction of a sustainable future.

Goals and Challenges

The goals of the meeting were fourfold, namely:

- To highlight the new questions raised by key concepts linked to issues relating to the intercultural dialogue (in particular “culture”, “civilization”, “dialogue”, “diversity”, “universality” and so on) in order to clarify ambiguities and dispel misconceptions.
- To address the question of collective representations of others and oneself by measuring the role of emotions and the irrational in such cultural imagination.
- To reflect on new fundamentals for humanity in order to meet the challenges of diversity in a concomitantly globalized and fragmented world.
- To comprehend the interactions between those differing levels in order to propose concrete actions to be taken to mainstream cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in sustainable development.

The proceedings were of excellent quality and particularly substantial and the high-level discussions allowed a formulation of the main current challenges, themes for reflection and proposals for action to emerge. The current challenges were identified by the participants as follows:

- To make an appropriate, inventive and innovative response to the hardening of inward-looking attitudes that lead to incomprehension and possible future confrontations.
- To combat the flawed “clash of civilizations” theory that generally encouraged that which it purportedly merely described.
- To overcome the “crisis of coexistence” experienced by human cultures in the era of globalization.
- To reject hatred, intolerance and terrorism.
- To dispel the attendant fear and tension as much as possible.

Topics Discussed

The discussion focused on three main topics and their interdependence.

Words of Dialogue

The participants reflected on the choice of key words in issues of intercultural dialogue, highlighting, in particular, the existing differences between languages and therefore the differences in their semantic fields. They noted that “experts” in one culture could play a crucial role in increasing mutual understanding and eliminating prejudices in their own culture and in those which they study. In that connection, the participants stressed that it was important for each culture to build up an understanding on the basis of its own specific characteristics by experientially combining rationality and effect. Positive life experiences in intercultural

contexts could thus be regarded as experiments in local cosmopolitanism and should be studied and increased in number.

The meaning of key terms, in particular the relationship between “diversity” and “pluralism”, and the acceptance of the concept of culture as well as all of its distinctive characteristic features and its openness to the future, was also discussed. Culture was thus defined as all the elements that a society requires to effect the transition from today to tomorrow and even as an important source of inspiration for development. The notion of cultural diversity was addressed as a fact or feature, while the notion of “pluralism” was addressed as a policy-mediated response in taking up the challenges inherent in cultural diversity and as a reality resulting from the constructive behaviour of individuals and groups in multicultural contexts. The need to take account of the variety of concepts within a single language (Arabic, for example) was also underlined, by means of specific examples, as it is an important element in the richness of intercultural dialogue.

Imaginary Construct of the Culture of Others

Several convergent analyses underlined the great importance of collective representations in the way cultures relate to each other. Ideas about others were as important as meeting them face to face. The great divides (East/West, North/South for example) were complex constructs, both imaginary and real. Prejudice fed on negative images of others, disseminated all too often by school textbooks and the media, which shaped the collective imagination. The crucial role of emotions and feelings in the impact of the collective imagination on intercultural relations was also highlighted. The participants called on UNESCO to pay greater attention to the analysis of the formation and development of those representations, inasmuch as they had a decisive impact on wars



Mosque, Paris (Ducasse-Lounes/Gamma/Eyedea/Contacto).

and genocide, and as better knowledge of the processes involved in the development of the collective imagination might inform educative action in the broad sense of the term.

Current Basic Notions

Although dialogue was still the key notion, the participants stressed the role to be played by human beings in dialogue, which had never been an abstract or disembodied process but primarily entailed interaction between individuals. They also considered the conditions required for genuine dialogue, in particular at a time when the industrialization of culture and knowledge was leading to the primacy of profit over human values. Furthermore, the notion of interdependence was seen as central to the developing multifaceted worldwide civiliza-

tion. As a counterpoint to diversity, the question of similarity was raised, not as the result of standardization but, on the contrary, as the first condition of the coexistence of cultures and persons. Indeed, emphasis on diversity only meant that a necessary condition of all dialogue, namely recognition of that which made human beings similar to each other, could be disregarded.

Similarly, humanity's psychic unity was mentioned, as were its shared emotions and vulnerability. The current era was characterized by the rise of fear, apprehension, anxiety and even disquiet over survival. In appraising both sides of the current situation, namely on the one hand, a world generally agreed to be characterized by rising tensions and growing risks and, on the other, the aims and values

to which all aspire, in particular shared dignity and knowledge of each other, it must be borne in mind that vulnerability is the feature common to all human beings. In that connection, the participants laid emphasis on human frailty, and on the need to promote hospitality, empathy and a form of humility in the practice of intercultural relations which, moreover, required specific skills and training without, however, becoming mechanistic.

Practical Strategies and Measures

Practical strategies and measures, including the participation of youth leaders, leaders of opinion and the best qualified Non-Governmental Organizations in this field, were suggested. The participants suggested that a working group be established to further discuss the issues addressed.

Citizenship, Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue

Design in-depth structural reforms in order to change mentalities and raise awareness of issues relating to cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue among teachers and learners, the media and civil society, with a view to the emergence of civic consciousness.

Understanding the diversity inherent in one's own culture was a prerequisite for understanding worldwide cultural diversity. Each culture must therefore seek to understand itself as one and diverse. Nevertheless, in mapping internal diversity a special effort was required to ensure that cultural resource maps did not create division lines that could lead to ghettoization or even cultural apartheid. Cultural resources, being permeable and dynamic, crossed state borders; it was therefore appropriate for cultural mapping to be participatory and cross-border, as recommended by UNESCO.

Recognize the fundamental rights and duties of individuals, who would thus be encouraged to take responsibility for the exercise of those rights and duties, which would inform their daily behaviour; ensure equal enjoyment of citizenship within the same country, since it must be equal for all; find common denominators for peaceful coexistence in a world of inequalities and disparities and of extreme poverty alongside opulence, in particular in urban areas.

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Fulfil the conditions for genuine dialogue and thus enable intercultural dialogue, the corollary to cultural diversity, to play its essential role in the resolution of tensions. The aim was not to impose dialogue but to invite the parties to the conflict, to participate voluntarily. Dialogue must be premised on respect and mutual recognition and the domination of one culture by another was therefore excluded. Intercultural dialogue must be distinguished from negotiation, which led perforce to an agreement beneficial to the parties to the conflict, whether they were two or more, whereas dialogue encourages readiness to question well-established certainties by bringing both reason and sentiment into play.

Dissemination and Transmission of Knowledge

Support the practical measures proposed which converge on the issue of reform of the education system, in particular through the detailed examination and revision of school textbooks in order to make suggestions on the removal of negative images of others, incitement to hatred, violence or contempt. The task could be facilitated by taking relevant

experiments conducted in several universities and research already completed or underway into account. Similarly, encourage a wide variety of inventive and innovative methods that could give the same results, thus contributing to educational diversity since several roads lead to learning.

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Promote the reform of school textbooks concomitantly, perforce, with prior and continuing training of teachers, the main actors in the mainstreaming of the principles of cultural diversity into education. Indeed, teachers must play the role of educators to the full, as they must not only transmit knowledge but also comment critically and clearly on the content transmitted. The learners' different affinities and identities (individual but also community, national and global) must be taken into account, while meeting new needs for both local and global citizenship through education that would lay the foundation of heightened global awareness.

Establish in each sub-region centres of excellence and UNESCO Chairs in cultural diversity, which would be set the tasks in identifying and studying good practices: such Chairs fostered conviviality, mutual understanding and "living as one", as shown by case studies, and were sensitive to the mainstreaming of principles of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in all policies for sustainable development. Those UNESCO centres of excellence and Chairs would also be set the task of improving the dissemination and circulation of knowledge so that relevant and unbiased

information on the portrayals of each culture could be obtained. It is to be noted that, historically, ideas and their underlying philosophies have survived to date because they have been disseminated and transmitted from one age to another owing to such mechanisms.

Open international student centres, granted the UNESCO label, so that cultural diversity, dialogue and sustainable development would be deeply rooted in the thought and action of the young generations. A UNESCO prize would also be established in this respect to reward successful experiments in the area of intercultural dialogue.

The Promotion and Protection of Cultural Diversity, Creativity and Cultural Heritage

Promote a dynamic vision requiring everyone to take a creative approach to the notion and application of cultural diversity, an example being the creative arts which held pride of place in the learning and practice of artistic expressions (writing, dance, music, theatre, street art and so on). Cultural heritage was the most eloquent form of creativity as expressed in the past and transmitted to the present. Cultural heritage should therefore be protected and preserved as the symbolic reference point par excellence for individual and collective identities.

Learn to listen to and appreciate the various forms of expression of cultural diversity, on the one hand, and measure the extent of its contribution to the progress and well-being of humanity, on the other.

Deconstruct the logic of prejudices detrimental to mutual understanding to enable humanity to learn to improve knowledge of itself; as a first step in that endeavour, compile a scientific, philosophical and literary anthology highlighting, on the one hand, the thoughts of Western authors relating to Arab-Muslim civilization and, on the other, those of Arab authors on Western civilization; lay emphasis on mutual borrowing and influences.

Produce a “cultural diversity textbook” intended for all regions of the world and translated into several languages, in print, electronic and audiovisual formats. Carry out studies on representations, values and stereotypes of otherness, such as those conveyed by various media.

Conclusion

In sum, during the three days of meetings, three main points were identified: the pressing need to mainstream cultural diversity and

intercultural dialogue in policies for sustainable development in order to move towards a multifaceted worldwide civilization; the importance of taking up, particularly in formal and informal education, the challenges raised by an increasingly interconnected world in the field of culture at a time when the world’s very survival was in danger; the urgent need to take the role of the collective imagination, and related emotional processes, in relation to other cultures into account, in order to formulate policies as appropriate to remedy the harmful consequences of stereotyped images of others.