

Creating Inter-cultural Communities & The role of Adult Education - A minority perspective

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First of all, let me express my heartfelt thanks to the organisers of this important conference, for the invitation. I am truly touched by this gesture. The subject of inter-cultural communities is very close to my heart, whether it is in Europe or elsewhere.

Since there are many experts in this conference who can give better professional input concerning inter-cultural learning in Europe, my presentation would be about ethnic and religious minorities and how they look at the whole question. I call it inter-culturalism seen with brown eyes. And believe me from where I stand, the inter-cultural scene looks different but clearer.

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I am a NGO person. All my life, I have worked against all types of intolerance - racial bigotry, ethnic inequality, cultural arrogance and discrimination against religions. That is why, I measure all issues concerning majority and minorities interaction, from a moral and humanistic standpoint as well as judicial protection. And to have a meaningful dialogue and co-operation, it is vital that I am brutally honest in my assessment and do not beat around the bush.

Inter-culturalism in Europe

When we discuss Inter-culturalism, inter-cultural learning, inter-cultural interaction and even education of non-European ethnic and religious minorities, it is advisable that we first look at four mechanisms in European societies.

- What do we understand with the concept - Inter-culturalism?
- What are the socio-economic conditions of minorities in Europe?
- What are the effects of discrimination and lack of opportunities?
- What role media and the politicians play in creating prejudices?

I sincerely believe and my experience also tells me that finding answers to these vital questions will enable us to be more objective and nuanced in our efforts to create a truly harmonious society. It would also clearly explain, why the so-called integration process has not succeeded up until now.

But before I make an effort to present my views for your consideration and of course discussion, please let me give you a short history of those people, I refer to as non-European ethnic and religious minorities.

According to Euro-barometer, there are 23 million persons living in Europe whose origins are from outside Europe; Middle East, Asia, Latin America, Africa and some from USA, Canada and Australia.

70% among these groups have a Muslim background and it is these people, Europeans refer to as foreigners, when the topics of integration and multi-culturalism is discussed. I am aware that some persons among ethnic minorities in Europe like to consider themselves as European and they have absolute right to do so.

But one thing is, what some of us wish to call ourselves and how some of the Europeans really perceive us. Self identification and perceived identity is a necessary issue which in my opinion should be discussed sooner than we wish.

To put things in perspective, let me give you my own example.

I have lived 40 years in Europe and USA. I speak 6 languages and have two university degrees. I have a Danish passport since 1976. I never received any social help, have paid lots of taxes and even managed to have 3 children with 2 women without marrying or living together with them. I know that I have done more than most native Danes or Europeans can ever do for the society - socially, economically, politically and even intellectually.

But I and most people like me are still considered as outsiders, foreigners and funny enough just immigrants. This is the reality of Europe 2008. It is not what you contribute to the society but how you look, what culture you are born in and more and more if you are a Muslim. That is what makes one's identity in today's Europe.

So the whole issue of inter-culturalism in Europe has become a question of Natives versus Guests, Integration versus Segregation, West versus Islam and Democracy versus Extremism. Mind you, I am not blaming anyone group, religion or culture. I am just stating, what I see, read and experience. I do sincerely hope that you do not think that I am being apologetic for some rotten apples among largely peaceful Muslim communities.

Not at all. I am not a believer of cultural absolutism and I fervently oppose parallel societies. But I understand the dilemmas minorities are facing in Europe because I am part of them, work with them and listen to their worries. Having said that I know that you, the participants of this conference are dedicated people. You are doing a wonderful job in your respective capacity. You are also worried about the situation, I am describing.

I am critical of the present European policies because, I have seen the humane side of Europe. Today, I miss the genuine solidarity, true democratic values in practice, freedom of expression under responsibility, social justice for all, human rights in deed and not in name only and last but not least, useful protection under the law.

It is because of my appreciation of European values and my conviction that there still exists decency that I am worried about the wrong direction Europe has taken in the last 10 years or so.

Now let me share with you a recent example of **European model of inter-cultural dialogue on the highest level.**

To kick start the Year of Inter-cultural dialogue, the European Commission's Culture and Youth DG held the opening conference in January 2008. Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini was at that time Commissioner of Justice and Vice President of EU Commission. Mr Frattini and I were main speakers. I was to speak at the start to present minority perspective on inter-culturalism and the Commissioner Frattini was supposed to comment on my views.

He came 15 minutes late, demanded to speak first and then left. In his speech, he talked about terrorism, extremism, how Muslims should behave and kept on calling minorities as foreigners.

So this is the European official model of inter-cultural dialogue.

Majority defines the discourse, dictates the terms and refuses to listen, let alone be advised. I wish that such action was an isolated incident, but it has been the norm for a long time. This is how most people among the majority understand inter-cultural dialogue.

Mindset has to alter

It is however thought provoking that most European politicians, institutions, media and public insist that a dialogue, co-operation and integration of non-European minorities should be based on the foundation of common values and democratic principles.

No sane person would disagree or reject such lofty vision.

But the problem with this approach is that these perceived common values are defined, drafted and thrust upon by the majority. Minorities have very little say in this matter. They have no power to protest against these practices or have means to challenge this mindset. To most minorities, these common values are no less than the dictatorship of the majority.

As far as the process of integration is concerned, the situation is no different. The majority asks the minorities to integrate without making any effort to do the same. The present official integration policy in most European countries is again prescribed by the majority, which sets strict conditions, provides few opportunities and often ignores to consult the minorities. On top of this, the blame for the lack of successful integration is squarely put on the doorstep of minorities by claiming;

They do not want to integrate.

But I am convinced that for a dynamic social process to succeed, we need an interaction of diverse cultures and an active involvement of individuals. After going through a non-stop exchange and acquiring knowledge, any person would be able to interact freely and thus modify attitudes and change behaviour. In short we need a cross fertilisation across all boundaries - between minorities and majority and between dominant and sub-cultures. Only then, we would create a true hybrid culture.

So what are the conditions for a dialogue in the society.

- An undying belief in the creation of a harmonious, inter-ethnic, inter-cultural and inter-religious common space
- A common vision
- A sense of belonging and collective ownership
- An equal playing field and position on the same table
- An open mind, two ways conversation and polite way of arguing
- Equal opportunities to agree as well as disagree
- A common strategy and plan of action
- A continuous effort to move forward

Here I would like to reaffirm that I am a great believer of a dialogue, but the time has come to move to a higher level. I call this inter-cultural co-operation between people - in order to learn, teach, share and benefit.

To have a clearer picture of the situation, let us see at the **models of present day societies in Europe**

- **Mono-cultural** - one dominant culture, religion, language, national identity and mindset has absolute say in the way, society is run
- **Multi-cultural** - mono-culture with a sprinkle of subcultures living on the periphery, commonly known as parallel societies. Power to decide still remains with the majority
- **Inter-cultural** - majority culture in constant interaction with minorities in a common negotiated space but with freedom to move freely, take part in decision making and share power

Mono-culturalism is out of question in the present circumstances. Multi-culturalism has not worked, not because minorities rejected it but because it was based on unreasonable demands from the majority and only had a tiny room for consultation with minorities.

In my opinion, it is the inter-cultural model, which is our only hope for the future.

Inter-cultural learning

Now I come to the question of education and learning, both formal and informal. In Europe, when minorities are discussed, we often hear about their lack of qualification, missing professional education, bad linguistic skills and even their primitive cultures being responsible for such situation.

I come from the land of Grundtvig, the grand father of life long learning. His movement of mass education was for the peasants and ordinary people who were not at the same level of knowledge as the elite, priests and landowners. It was not cultural, religious or scientific education. It was something unique; education for life in subjects, people could relate to.

Today Denmark and with it, all western countries are reaping the benefits of that pioneer work. Such a mass movement is again required in Europe to spread such knowledge among ethnic and religious minorities, preferably in their own mother tongues. It can be done through radio broadcasts, TV programmes, magazine and leaflets, neighbourhood classes and language classes.

Many people among ethnic groups have very little information as to what changes are taking place in their neighbourhood, in the city, in the country and even much less on EU level. This adult education should not be geared towards labour market but towards creating a new society.

A society where people with different backgrounds and from different cultures can be challenged, develop flexible attitudes, built bridges over troubled waters and live peacefully.

It may sound like **Hallelujah Syndrome** but it is not. After all, this is what happened in Europe among nations who hated each other for centuries. Apart from Balkan tragedy, we have a peaceful and prosperous Europe since 2nd World War.

Please keep in mind that the main aim of my criticism is not to put down anyone. I just want to remind the democratic Europe and its wonderful native citizens that we must hold on to the model of a society which is inclusive, values diversity and rewards all individuals for their contributions to the society, they live in.

It was the Europe of such high ideals, I fell in love with when I came to Europe as a student in 1966, and it is that humane Europe, I am again searching for.

But cultural diversity does not mean eating Donar Kebab, learning Belly Dance or listening to Bob Marley's music. To me diversity whether it is cultural, ethnic or religious is that we celebrate and enjoy the differences as well as similarities. We should practice it because we live in a globalised world. Internet, e-mail and fast travel has opened the borders, which can not be closed any longer.

Celebrating diversity does not mean that we force the other to accept the way, we do things. It can be only achieved by good examples, co-operation and respect. You, the delegates of this conference and many more, I meet all over Europe is the proof that decent people have had enough. Now they want to act.

My father was an educationalist. He often said to me; **"Soldiers destroy societies but teachers built them again"**.

I still remember his words and that is why I believe that education in itself is a sacred value, which leads to the paramount value of respect, and accept among people. Education not only gives knowledge, wisdom and self-confidence but also forms our opinions, attitudes and behaviour towards the society and people, we do not know or have not met before.

In short, education is a tonic, which sustains our spirit.

Unfortunately, when we look at the present landscape of Europe, we can see that gains achieved in last 150 years, to educate Europeans to cherish the values of diversity and of inter-culturalism, are under severe strain. A sizeable segment of media and many politicians are openly advocating mono-cultural identity of Europe based on Christian values, a common concept of history and the superiority of western culture.

Since this unilateral mindset can only be rearranged by the educators, **so let us see how Inter-cultural Education can be used.**

- Education is central in addressing the challenge of social cohesion and promoting solidarity and non-discrimination in a more diverse Europe.
- Education and training systems can instil values of respect, diversity and non-prejudice among minorities as well as majorities
- Education systems must ensure access and participation to quality education for all that adequately address underachievement and educational disadvantage.
- Better partnerships must be promoted between formal education and training systems and civil society in developing core competencies and skills.

As part of European Union, we should ask EU to:

- Promote a common vision of lifelong learning that creates bridges between individuals from all segments in society
- Improve and strengthen the social dimension of education and training in the context of the Lisbon goals and beyond
- Use mechanisms for co-ordination, financial support, mutual learning, and peer review in education in a more structured way to promote competence and best practice exchange among member states concerning race equality.

- Mainstream the specific issues and needs of ethnic minorities into current and future Open Methods of Coordination.
- A network of education professionals and policy makers could be developed, with a good representation of ethnic minority educators and education focused NGOs.

Task of educators

In my work with non-European visible minorities, I often get this question; **Why so many educated people in Europe have changed so drastically from humanism to racism in such a short time?**

I wish that I had a useful answer but I do not. All I know is that in such poisonous atmosphere, ethnic and religious minorities are looking towards you, for support, solidarity and for answers as to how to create an open society.

Please do not take it as finger pointing. I am just delivering the message, seen from grassroots and minority perspectives. You have every right to disagree or even reject what I am going to say.

Looking at the whole European education system and the place of ethnic and religious minorities in it, I would appeal to the educators to keep in mind few aspects:

- Inter-cultural education, where the starting point is not to emphasize the dominant culture but the contributions of various cultures to the well being of Europe.
- More inclusive curriculum where respect, accept and knowledge of each other is a basic factor of education.
- Education as part of a larger societal transformation and not to serve to maintain the status quo foundations such as white supremacy, capitalism, global socio-economic situation and labour exploitation.
- Equal opportunity to achieve full individual potential.
- Be prepared to effectively facilitate learning
- Be active participant in ending discrimination of all types, first by ending it within your own ranks, then by producing socially and critically active and aware citizens
- Educators, activists, and others must take a more active role in re-examining all educational practices and how they affect the learning
- Your contribution to integrate both majority and minorities with each other is vital

In order to have a successful relationship between an educator and the minorities, an educator's own opinions, vision, professionalism, knowledge and an interest in the learner's background plays an important role. It is not a 9-5 job but a life long commitment and a labour of love. A non-Euro-centric attitude of the teacher helps the minorities to open up and be receptive to the changes, they normally consider as, foreign, unnecessary or even hostile.

In short, educator can successfully enter where politicians, media and public have no access, namely the mind and soul of a minority individual. This is where the first step to mutual integration starts. Having said that, I am painfully aware that while majority has the power to open or close the door, a great deal of **responsibility also lies with minorities.**

The process of inter-cultural living can only succeed if minorities are pro-active, take a constructive attitude towards the wellbeing of the whole society and play their due part in the development process. In order to be respected and accepted by the larger society, I have always advised the minorities to do five practical things.

- Learn and master the language and educate yourself
- Accept and respect the law and the constitution of the land
- Create good relationships in the neighbourhoods
- Adopt and enjoy the majority culture as best as you can
- Practice your culture and religion peacefully and show respect to your fellow human being

Over and above these 5 conditions, every person has all the rights to live life according to his/ her needs, wishes and desires.

State, authorities and society should not dictate or force a minority person to assimilate, overtake the majority norms or be a bad copy of the majority. So in the end, it all boils down to mutual effort.

Here, I want to offer a word of caution to ethnic minorities.

We must be aware that full participation will not be served on a silver plate. It has to be gained through political struggle, based on a clear analysis, doing away with wishful thinking and with a close co-operation of those who still believe in human rights, pluralistic development and most important of all in keeping their societies democratic.

Common front and common efforts

I propose that progressive people like you and ethnic minority organisations must join forces and talk directly to the people. This approach will create trust and understanding among the ethnic minorities and encourage them to take the full responsibility of their actions.

It will also make it easier for the authorities to understand the problems faced by the ethnic minorities, like unavailability of financial resources, absence of networking and lack of opportunities. We need a strong movement of dedicated people all across Europe to join forces, involve minorities and discuss in earnest in formulating policies and taking practical steps.

I would also take this opportunity to praise the EU Commission for its vision and support for those who want to make a difference. I wish individual countries in Europe also wake up from sleep and see the beauty of inter-cultural living.

Unfortunately, our experience tells us that if it is left to member states to formulate and implement good policies and practices, Europe will never achieve a peaceful, harmonious and inter-cultural status, like Canada, USA or even Australia. Media populism and political nationalism has become that two headed snake which is scary and guarding the vested interests.

That is why, it is left to us - noble people among minorities and the majority to make an extra effort to be inclusive. This society is yours as much as mine. My rights are yours and they need protection, care and a voice. We should all speak up before it is too late.

So where do we go from here!

Ethnic minorities sincerely believe that there are people, movements and forces in Europe who are concerned about their beautiful country and continent, its great human values, its international reputation, its freedom-loving spirit, and its humanism. The task ahead may be difficult, but it is not impossible.

As the great anthropologist Margaret Mead once said;

" Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has".

We want a Europe of true peace and prosperity for all its inhabitants. Minorities certainly want to be respected as fellow human being. They want their colour, religion, accent, cultural and ethnic background not to be seen and experienced as a hindrance, but instead, as a positive and enhancing contribution to the society they live in.

The ethnic minorities and the progressive forces must join hands, and this co-operation must be above political ideology and human pity. They must work to build a society free of prejudices, and bubbling with tolerance and heartfelt openness.

This can happen if the western rational spirit mingles with the eastern philosophical soul, paving the way for a true understanding.

The Great Lebanese philosopher and poet Khalil Gibran once said:

"Love is not looking at each other, but looking in the same direction".

I would end by quoting what the late American writer, Susan Sontag once said:

"Some people claim that Europe is dead.

May be, it will be right to say that Europe is yet to be born.

A Europe that takes care of its defenceless minorities is badly needed.

It is necessary that Europe is multi-cultural, otherwise it will cease to exist".

Only fools would disagree!

Thank you very much for listening.