

Cultural Diversity in Europe: Multicultural Societies and Inter-cultural Dialogue

Europe and the European Union with its 27 Member States is a prime example of a region with a culturally diverse population. This diversity is the result of ethnic and linguistic minorities created by centuries of wars and forced or voluntary migration.

Europe, with its wealth of different languages and complex historical roots, has been forced to come to terms with the cultural and social aspects of its diverse population.

Cultural diversity is *key* to the European debate on culture and cultural policy.

The concept of European cultural diversity and identity is built on two distinct and almost contradictory ideas: on the one hand the diversity of cultures, and on the other the assumption of a shared history and common “roots”.

These two ideas are reconciled in the European Union’s “unity in diversity” motto. This implies that each country’s culture is, and should remain, “diverse”, while simultaneously maintaining bonds with other European countries, represented by common values and a common cultural heritage.

In recent years, the “unity in diversity” motto has had to face several new challenges presented by the societal and economic manifestations of globalisation. These manifestations include the successive enlargements of the EU, new migratory flows, and the greater mobility of single markets. They also include increased interactions with others through trade, travel, the use of telecommunications and the Internet, international education, and general leisure activities.

The phenomenon of immigration is perhaps the greatest challenge. Today more than five percent of the resident EU population are non-EU Member State nationals. Multiculturalism is present in almost all the countries of the EU.

However, since the late 1990s, official policies concerning multiculturalism in Europe have been met with increasing opposition. Multiculturalism itself has become the focal point of a political ideological debate. Critics allege that as a model it has failed, that immigrant minorities remain “outsiders”, and that they are not participating in the civic and social life of the host country.

In order to deal with these challenges, various initiatives for intercultural dialogue have been launched at different levels. It is important to inspire people to actively get in touch with other cultures, and thus contribute to an environment of tolerance and mutual respect.

Inter-cultural dialogue cannot be implemented from above – a bottom-up approach is essential, and civil society must play its part. A key focus are minorities and immigrants who need to fight against social exclusion. Responsibility for inter-cultural dialogue should be shared by all.

The EU has decided to make 2008 the "European Year of Inter-cultural Dialogue" to show the importance it places on this issue.

The objective is to promote inter-cultural dialogue to assist EU citizens in acquiring the knowledge to enable them to deal with a more open – and more complex – environment and to benefit from the opportunities provided by such a diverse and dynamic society.

People living in the EU should become more aware of developing an active European “citizenship” open to the world, respectful of cultural diversity and based on the EU’s common values.