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Migration, Media and Intercultural Dialogue

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Intercultural Dialogue or Intercultural
Soliloquies?

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This research programme focuses on a range of issues, theoretical and practical, related to cultural diversity and difference. Migration and media are twin facets of globalization, the one demographic, with crucial spatio-temporal consequences, and the other cultural and technological. While migration often poses the question of cultural difference, diverse forms of media play a key role in enabling representation, thus forging modes of communication. Through a focus on the role of media, this research programme explores the extent to which the latter bridges cultural differences in contexts of migration and facilitates intercultural dialogue. Of interest too are the ways in which media can mobilize societies and cultures. Also relevant is the role of media in triggering migration, as well as in connecting migrants to their homelands.

Intercultural Dialogue or Intercultural Soliloquies?

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Summary

This report examines how the different UN Member States have interpreted and consequently implemented “Intercultural Dialogue”. In particular, this study explores how different platforms developed, how media are used to cover their activities and how civil society has been involved. Its main objective is to interpret the different conceptions of “Intercultural Dialogue”, in order to suggest ways to improve this practice across policy-makers and political leaders of the UN Member States.

Aims and Objectives

This report aims to highlight that both the concept and the practice of “Intercultural Dialogue” vary across UN Member States. For each of them, this expression brings with it a particular interpretation of who are subjects of this dialogue, which parties should be involved in its implementation, and what is its final aim. These different understandings of “Intercultural Dialogue” have been the basis of its implementation by the states involved. This suggests that, instead of an “Intercultural Dialogue”, different “Intercultural Dialogues” are emerging from the different implementation activities put in place.

From a previous study which took into account the scientific debates on this topic, it could be acknowledged that the very definition of “Intercultural Dialogue” expresses the way states wish to structure power relations between each other. In fact, as the constructivist approach in the field of International Relations has proved (Wendt 1999), non-material resources, including ideas and cultures, affect the way the international arena is structured and how international actors perform within it, as well as material resources (Bello 2013).

The main objective of this report is to interpret these different conceptions of “Intercultural Dialogue” in order to suggest ways to improve this practice. One core finding is that efforts are needed to ensure that the different “Intercultural Dialogues” currently in existence do not become “Intercultural Soliloquies”. In fact, the practice of having different platforms and forms of “Intercultural Dialogue” and even its “pluralization” is not in itself an unhealthy solution. Instead, it should be considered a form of cultivating richness in intercultural relations, a means of avoiding ethnocentrism of initiatives, and ultimately as a way of sustaining partnerships of goodwill on key topics for peace and security. However, states and coalitions should be aware of the importance of communication among different platforms.

Platforms for Intercultural Dialogue

At the Security Council Meeting 6322 (SC 2010a, S6322), held on 26 May 2010, there were the 15 UN Security Council Members: the five permanent representatives with veto power (China, France, Russia, US, UK), and then the other 10, non-permanent, members (the President of the SC, which was Lebanon at that time, then Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Gabon, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Turkey, and Uganda). On the agenda was the maintenance of international peace and security, particularly through the discussion of the concept of “Intercultural Dialogue”. A letter dated 19 May 2010 from the permanent representative of Lebanon to the UN, which was addressed to the Secretary General Ban Ki Moon (SC 2010b, S/2010/248) set up the opportunity for this discussion. For the first time since 2005, when this concept was initially used within the Security Council, the necessity to understand the different ways the UN members conceived “Intercultural Dialogue” was finally recognized.

From an analysis of the official document which contains the speeches delivered in that occasion (SC 2010a, S6322), it seems that within the Security Council two main positions developed. First, there is that of the two ex-superpowers (US and Russia), which see Intercultural Dialogue as a way to strengthen the political mediators who should then deal with security issues. Second, there is that of most of the other members, who consider “Intercultural Dialogue” as a tool in itself for securing peace in the world. The suggested platforms on which “Intercultural Relations” should be developed are: the UN itself, the UNESCO agency, the Alliance of Civilizations, and the Regional Players. This is reflected in the three main institutional platforms existing for “Intercultural Dialogue”.

One platform is the “Alliance of Civilizations”, an agency for intercultural dialogue promoted in late 2004 by the Prime Ministry of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, also supported by the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and which the previous Secretary General, Kofi Annan, had earlier established as a UN initiative.

The second is a EU-based platform on “Intercultural Dialogue”, created in 2007 through the European Commission’s Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World, and which is regarded “as a tool for contributing to the governance of cultural diversity within European societies, trans-nationally across European countries and internationally with other world regions” (Intercultural Dialogue – European Commission DG Education and Culture & European Research Institute for Comparative Cultural Research website). The first two institutional platforms are quite interconnected, and in fact the executive director of the EU-based platform, Andreas Wiesand, is also an advisor to the “Alliance of Civilizations”.

The third platform is the “Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and Development”, sponsored by the Philippines and supported by ASEAN. Its First Informal Summit of Leaders was held on 13 September 2005, while its first forum was held in Cebu (The Philippines) in March 2006, and hosted representatives from Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. The Second Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace was held on 27 September 2007 and the Third Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace of Ministers of like-minded States¹ held at United Nations Headquarters on 25 September 2008. As a regional, side-initiative, the ASEM has also established an “Interfaith Dialogue” which is currently at its fifth forum, held in Seoul, Korea in 2009.

There are also several non-governmental organizations which are widely connected with these initiatives, such as the World Public Forum, “Dialogue of Civilizations”, which is “a deliberative-consultative body that unites into a single network various international and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), representatives of public and state institutions, civil society organizations and faith-based groups, academics, representatives of cultural, spiritual, business, and media spheres from different countries” (World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations” website). Or the Institute of Interfaith Dialogue which “was established in 2002 as a non-profit educational organization by Turkish-Americans and their friends. The Institute aims to eliminate or reduce false stereotypes, prejudices and unjustified fears through direct human communication.” (Institute of Interfaith Dialogue website).

Media coverage of Intercultural Dialogue

The necessity to use media in order to increase Intercultural Dialogue awareness was suggested by many UN SC members. This section is intended to understand both how these different platforms are using media to increase awareness of “Intercultural Dialogue”, and the media coverage of it.

The way media is used in the different institutional platforms varies greatly. The EU-based platform for Intercultural Dialogue uses the website as the main media content producer, and it is addressed to experts only. It also sponsors OpenLines, an Online Open Forum (LabforCulture.org) which is aimed at collecting the contributions of citizens. However, its policies on media are quite strong and intense, which includes the two following projects:

- 1) The “Online/More Colours in the Media” (OL/MCM) network. This is “a network of NGO’s, broadcasters, training institutes and researchers, set up to improve the representation of ethnic minorities in broadcasting. It has developed a European Manifesto to support and underline the importance of minority community media. The network aims to influence media coverage on minority groups and disseminates expertise and good practice” (Intercultural Dialogue European Commission website).
- 2) “Europe Media Technology and Everyday Life Network”, is a research project

¹ Its Member States are: People’s Republic of Bangladesh, Republic of Belarus, Arab Republic of Egypt, Republic of the Gambia, Republic of Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Malaysia, Kingdom of Morocco, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Republic of the Philippines, Republic of Senegal, Republic of Serbia, Republic of Slovenia, Republic of Tajikistan, Kingdom of Thailand and Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

located at the London School of Economics, which compares media throughout Europe.

Of the three platforms discussed, the Alliance of Civilizations is the one which uses media most intensively, and particularly new media. It has a channel on Youtube with 125 subscribers and nearly 25000 video views, which is very few compared to the extent these social media are used. It has many online platforms, with translations into Spanish and Arab, and engages in several campaigns, which are given visibility through media content (video, pictures, online forums) and competitions for users in order to draw public attention.

The third platform, the Ministerial Meeting of Like-minded States, also has a website which explains its activities. Therein, it is possible to find all official documents, all supported initiatives, divided by country, as well as by region. It also identifies its international developments. It has an official photo gallery, an open newsletter and an online forum of discussions. It encourages users to post their initiatives on Facebook, and it ensures that there are many ways to engage with various social media. Its activities are reported by existing non-governmental organizations on Intercultural Dialogues, as well as by governmental bodies.

Involvement of civil society

UN Security Council Member States from Africa and from Europe in the meeting 6322 (SC2010a, S/6322) mentioned that civil society should be involved in "Intercultural Dialogue". In particular, the Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, and the representatives of Nigeria, Uganda, the UK, Turkey and France, expressly referred to civil society as a sector which should take an active role in the implementation of the "Intercultural Dialogue". US, Lebanon, Brazil and Nigeria, instead, focused particularly on the importance of including religious representatives. That women should also have a role was mentioned in the discourse of the representatives of France, Japan, Brazil and Austria. Six countries claimed that a special role was to be played by youth, including Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, the US, Uganda and Japan.

However, from the activities shown on the websites of the three platforms, it is clear that a very crucial role is indeed played by religious representatives, which take part in initiatives of both the Alliance of Civilizations and the Interfaith Dialogue sponsored by the Philippines. Youth have been designated as a sort of "junior" agency in the Alliance of Civilization, with the creation of "Alliance of Civilizations Youth. Connecting Youth Action Across Borders". This junior agency indeed uses social media to a wider extent than the major platform of the AoC. For each of the three platforms, it seems that women have been involved far less to this point.

This shows that, despite some efforts to include civil society, there is much more left to do. In particular, some parts of civil society are not involved in the current developments of this "Intercultural Dialogue", including women, non-governmental organizations and youth. At a high level, the states involved in the development of these projects may want to achieve more openness towards these groups in the future. The UN also needs to take into account the suggestions made by those UN Security Council Member States who have shed light on the importance of engaging civil society.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the study presented in this report, it is clear that there are different interpretations of the concept “Intercultural Dialogue” and its implementation. This suggests that there is disagreement between the various representatives who were seated in the Security Council meeting 6322. Three different platforms with different initiatives exist. This indicates that, instead of an “Intercultural Dialogue”, various “Intercultural Dialogues” are developing.

However, the practice of having different platforms and forms of “Intercultural Dialogue” is not itself an unhealthy solution (Bello 2013). Instead, it should be considered a form of cultivating richness in intercultural relations, avoiding ethnocentrism, and finally of sustaining partnerships of goodwill on key topics for peace and security. However, states and coalitions should be aware of the importance of enabling the different platforms to communicate with each other.

In particular, three main recommendations are worth mentioning:

- 1) The imposition of one platform, or its recognition as the main institutional stage, may create discontent among those states and coalitions which have proposed different initiatives.
- 2) The different platforms could contemplate the realization of a common network, perhaps through the arrangement of regular joint meetings. The different platforms should not consider themselves in competition. UN Member States should avoid taking part in only the established initiatives. Instead, all states should show a good will to be involved in the different projects, even though participating just as observers.
- 3) Each of the platforms should make more efforts to include wider parts of civil society in their activities; in particular, women, youth and non-governmental organizations should be allowed to play a more active role. Perhaps this would also help them to achieve more publicity in new and old media.

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