

The Distinctive Contribution of the Arts to Intercultural Dialogue

A View from and on the Arts

Report on European Forum

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**PLATFORM FOR
INTERCULTURAL EUROPE**



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1 Introduction

1.1 The Platform for Intercultural Europe

The Platform for Intercultural Europe developed as a civil society response to the European Union's Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008. It was launched with the support of the European Culture Foundation and Culture Action Europe and brought together actors in the fields of culture, education, youth and social work, minority rights, and anti-discrimination and human rights. During 2008, the Platform organised a number of meetings and conferences that led to the publication of a Rainbow Paper (a policy paper dealing with cultural diversity). This document was published in September 2008 under the title *Intercultural Dialogue: From Practice to Policy and Back*. By June 2009, the Rainbow Paper had been endorsed by 334 organisations in Europe as the basis for future policy and strategy.

The Platform began as a campaign and has now become an established civil society association linking a wide range of European, national and local organisations committed to promoting intercultural dialogue. It is also recognised by the European Commission as a formal interlocutor in this area, within the framework of the 'Structured Dialogue' between the EU and civil society. Consequently, the Platform now receives some financial support from the Commission and is consulted on policy in its area of competence.

1.2 The European Intercultural Forum, June 2009

On 8 June 2009, the Platform for Intercultural Europe held its first European Forum as an independent civil society organisation. The meeting, supported by the European Commission, brought together 75 participants from 18 countries and was followed by the first Annual General Assembly of the membership.

The Platform's interest in intercultural issues is potentially very far reaching, touching on the fields as diverse as culture, migration and human rights. The Steering Committee therefore decided to focus its work on specific areas each year, in order to define more manageable policy discussion. In 2009-10, the focus is on the arts and culture as a space for intercultural dialogue; the first Forum therefore addressed this area, asking three related questions:

- How can the arts enable intercultural dialogue?
- What are the risks or limitations of the arts in intercultural dialogue?
- What advice could be given to anyone using the arts to promote intercultural dialogue?

The day was structured around four platform interventions addressing these questions from different perspectives, including the arts, social action, the media and the academy. Each of these was a focus of specific debate in plenary sessions, while workshops gave all the participants a chance to contribute their experiences and ideas. The intention was to gain a broad overview of the landscape of how the arts currently support intercultural dialogue and how they might do so in future.

Broad questions of policy were an appropriate concern for a Forum that drew its participants from across and beyond the European Union, though many contributions were informed by practice. The Platform will deepen its knowledge and understanding through smaller, regional Practice Exchanges, the first of which was scheduled to take place in Malmö in June 2009. The Platform aims to fulfil the Rainbow Paper's ambition to explore intercultural dialogue 'from practice to policy and back' through the interaction between these two kinds of meetings.

1.3 The report on the Forum's discussions

This report summarises the key issues that emerged during the European Forum, though inclusion here does not imply that everyone present agreed with any specific point. It does not set out all the interventions made or the points raised (detailed meeting notes were made for the record). Rather, it is a basis for further work by the Platform, for refinement and further debate. Through this iterative process, the Platform will develop policy proposals and practice guidance. Intercultural dialogue is a vital and complex issue: this document aspires to be one more step forward in its continuing development in European society.

2 The arts, culture and intercultural dialogue

2.1 Introduction: the distinctive benefits of art and culture

The words 'arts' and 'culture' are used differently across Europe and between different actors. The Forum used a very inclusive concept of culture in its discussions whilst recognising the particular role of art and the work of professional artists.

There was general acknowledgement that art and cultural programmes do not, in themselves, result in intercultural dialogue: the mere coexistence of different forms of artistic practice was far from achieving the kind of societal change envisaged in the Rainbow Paper. Likewise, the international exchanges common in art festivals was, at best, a first step in this process. However, *the potential of art and culture to play a distinctive role in supporting intercultural dialogue was strongly affirmed* and this section of the report outlines some of the potential.

2.2 Making visible

Culture enables people to express and share their identity and values and so to become visible members of society. Through public artistic products such as film, theatre, music and exhibitions, marginalised groups – who are often the objects of hostile representation in the media and majority culture – can present themselves as their own subjects. Several examples were given of the positive effects of such events in changing local attitudes towards groups such as migrants, asylum seekers and established minorities. Art is a powerful form of communication that, handled sensitively, can be an effective form of intercultural dialogue between social groups.

2.3 Similarities not differences

Culture can build empathy and understanding through initiatives that highlight shared experiences and common ground between people. By providing actual and metaphorical meeting spaces, cultural programmes can raise awareness of similarities and even collective values. They can also find historic and current connections between cultures, for instance in recognising that the international aspect of artistic practices such as hip-hop may be as important as the unique aspects of local culture.

2.4 A different language

Art and culture is often non-verbal and usually not literal. In many forms it enables communication between people who do not even share a common language. The Forum noted the importance of music, among other art forms, as a way of bringing together people. Art can also allow things to be expressed safely that might be challenging to say or hear directly. Watching a dance performance or enjoying a concert can give people insights into other cultures without any commitment to further engagement. The first step towards intercultural dialogue is a willingness to share the same space: from such small beginnings, trust and confidence can be built.

2.5 Participatory and community projects

Community-based work that encourages people to be active participants in art rather than audiences for the work of professionals was seen as particularly important to intercultural dialogue. Its emphasis on process makes space for people to work with and learn from each other. The results of such work can demonstrate intercultural values in action and be the basis of further engagement. In addition to their artistic outcomes, such programmes can have positive outcomes on building individual and collective skills, promoting integration and developing social capital.

Participants also highlighted the value of community-based cultural action in education, health, urban regeneration and social cohesion. Some referred to the healing, even therapeutic, potential of involvement in art projects, particularly in the case of refugees among others. Again, in this context, the positive nature of such projects – building on people's strengths not their problems – was seen as pertinent.

2.6 Stressing the positive

Culture enables people to share their achievements, their creativity and their distinctive contribution to society. It can focus on strengths rather than weaknesses and on what people have to offer rather than what they may need. The approachable and enjoyable nature of cultural activity may be particularly valuable when other aspects of people's lives are difficult. Culture is not – and should not be used as – a palliative, but it can be a powerful source of affirmation and confidence building. The capacity of the arts to give people hope, literally to 'en-courage', was seen by many participants as one of its most important attributes.

3 Limitations of the arts in intercultural dialogue

3.1 Introduction: the risks of using the arts in intercultural dialogue

The Forum recognised the contested nature of culture and the potential that exists for its misuse to fuel differences and divisions and was conscious of this in recent European history. Even without this danger, a number of other potential problems were identified including 'top-down' or paternalistic approaches to cultural policy and programming, Eurocentric attitudes and narrowly conservative ideas of cultural value.

At the same time, culture's importance was recognised precisely because of the danger that it could be misused to foment division. This risk is one of the major reasons why civil society needs to be at the forefront of promoting a democratic, open and inclusive cultural life in Europe.

3.2 Failing to secure community ownership

Many participants stressed the importance of engaging communities directly in every aspect of cultural development and of recognising and supporting independent cultural projects. Good intentions are not enough. Public authorities establish programmes and cultural spaces in the hope of encouraging intercultural dialogue but fail because they do not effectively involve the full range of intended beneficiaries. These initiatives often fail to secure community ownership and struggle to fulfil their potential. Valuing and empowering community activities are essential to local cultural development and intercultural dialogue.

3.3 Paternalism and hierarchy

Cultural values are not neutral and it is often difficult for dominant cultures to approach others – especially migrant or marginalised groups – on a truly equal basis. Even within established national cultures, there is the risk of elitism (which was seen as distinct from excellence) and a perception that the publicly financed arts are not as welcoming to all sections of society as they should be. Yet successful programmes need to observe and respect difference while accommodating it and valuing the dialogue it can produce.

3.4 Politicisation

The Forum highlighted the risks arising from culture being used for political objectives, even though artists and cultural organisations might share those objectives. The growing use of the arts in urban regeneration, economic development through the creative industries and social cohesion, among other policy issues, was cautiously welcomed.

While the Forum valued the recognition of culture's contribution and the connections this enabled, it was also concerned that limited understanding of the processes and complexity of arts practice could lead to simplistic or unrealistic expectations.

Misguided or naïve political interference in culture could damage creativity and lead to instrumentalism, standardisation and banalisation among other negative results. Any of these would not only damage cultural life but also fail to achieve any of the wider goals to which the programmes aspired.

3.5 Building barriers

The Forum considered that recognising the cultural diversity of European communities today and celebrating the distinctive contributions of all citizens was fundamental not only to cultural but to broader social and economic policy.

However, it also warned against essentializing identity and fixing individuals or even groups into cultural expressions defined by others. The arts and culture more widely are characterised as much by hybridity as by fixity and people need the space to move within and beyond any heritage they may be perceived as having. The freedom to define and express one's own cultural identity should be a fundamental right of European citizens.

4 Using the arts to promote intercultural dialogue: towards good practice

4.1 Introduction

In the light of the distinctive strengths and limitations of the arts in promoting intercultural dialogue, the Forum considered some broad lessons that could be drawn from the experience of its participants. This section outlines the key issues raised in this context, though without making specific recommendations at this stage.

4.2 Meeting spaces for intercultural dialogue

Access to spaces within which to meet and interact with others is a precondition of intercultural dialogue. Those spaces include buildings – and multipurpose arts venues were seen as crucial in this context – but also public areas such as streets, squares and gardens, which need to be made truly welcoming to all citizens. But there are also other kinds of spaces, such as the platforms provided by festivals, the local media and the Internet. Policies that actively encourage all democratic groups to represent themselves with mutual respect within these various spaces can promote intercultural dialogue.

4.3 Dialogue involves listening

Listening to people is another precondition of developing the conditions for intercultural dialogue. Policies should draw on the experience of artists, cultural actors, civil society organisations and others active in this area of work. It is equally important to enable community groups to articulate their interests and needs and to provide equitable support for the range of local cultural expression. Successful initiatives are themselves built through a respectful dialogue.

4.4 Supporting and engaging with the arts

Many of the Forum participants argued that the potential of the arts and culture to contribute to intercultural dialogue depended on the capacity of the sector itself. They saw this not only as a matter of finance and other resources, though that was important, but of a willingness on the part of political and social actors to recognise the role of arts organisations in intercultural dialogue.

The cultural sector is complex and authorities should recognise the different contributions of public, private and voluntary sector organisations, as well as individuals whose cultural activity is increasingly supported by new technology. This cultural life is organised formally and informally and the needs and interests of different actors vary widely. Supporting intercultural dialogue in policy and operational terms depends on understanding the distinct contribution and needs of all these sectors.

4.5 Internationalism and intercultural dialogue

The Forum stressed that the kind of international exchanges that are common in the arts should not, in themselves, be seen as a form of intercultural dialogue. Equally, it argued that they had the potential to be important steps towards a real dialogue within and not only between cities and nations. They have the potential to be real meeting places linking the local and the international. National cultural agencies, national governments and the European Union itself have a valuable contribution to make in promoting such exchange and dialogue.

5 Conclusions and next steps

5.1 Clarifying arts-led intercultural dialogue

The Forum valued arts projects that simply involve different cultures. These are an ordinary part of open and democratic cultures and, to some degree, happen automatically in EU-funded projects, which stipulate cooperation between partners from several EU countries.

But it wanted to place emphasis on initiatives that expressly promote intercultural dialogue, especially in the sense of dealing with local diversities. This distinction is important to the Platform precisely because it is the second type of work that it exists to promote.

After the Forum, the Platform wishes to work further on this issue. To that end, we suggest the following criteria for artistic projects that aspire to promote intercultural dialogue:

- They should have an explicit and publicly acknowledged goal of promoting democratic dialogue between local cultures;
- They should enable each cultural group to be involved in the project's conception, planning, management, delivery and evaluation;
- They should create formal and informal opportunities for public reflection and debate on their purpose;
- They should be willing not only to celebrate diversity but, where necessary, to confront tensions that may exist locally in relation to it;
- They should welcome an international dimension of intercultural dialogue;
- They should be able to demonstrate clearly their anticipated impact.

These criteria are presented here as the starting point of further debate, as the Platform seeks to develop and share a more rigorous conceptual framework for this kind of work in order to inform policy-makers and support practitioners.

5.2 Next steps

The Forum's purpose was to open up some important questions about the relationship between the arts and culture sectors and intercultural dialogue, recognising that the latter does not depend on the former, despite their close ties. It did not seek to reach conclusions or to make recommendations.

In keeping with the values of the Platform for Intercultural Europe and its principle of developing policy in open partnership, the Forum was designed as one step in a process of debate and reflection. This paper should enable further and more concrete discussion of the issues at the Practice Exchanges that will be held over the coming months.

At the same time, the Platform encourages informal debate around these issues and would welcome comments, revisions and suggestions on the ideas set out here. More voices in this discussion and more experiences informing it will only strengthen the outcome and the Platform itself in its dialogue with the European Commission and other agencies concerned with intercultural dialogue.