

ISLAM and INTEGRATION

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Abstract in English

Integration and mutual understanding between population groups are fostered by broad and open discussion in the city of Rotterdam. Therefore, the Municipality, *Projectbureau Sociale Integratie* (Social Integration Project Bureau) developed “Islam and Integration”, a project which, via information meetings, debates and focus groups within the Muslim communities in Rotterdam, has led to a series of public debates about the most important subjects relating to the theme Islam & Integration.

Abstract (italiano)

L'integrazione e la comprensione reciproca tra i gruppi all'interno di una stessa società sono favorite da una discussione ampia e aperta. Di conseguenza, il *Projectbureau Sociale Integratie* (Progetto di integrazione sociale) della città di Rotterdam ha sviluppato un piano d'azione chiamato “Islam e integrazione” che, attraverso riunioni con esperti, dibattiti all'interno delle Comunità musulmane residenti a Rotterdam ed incontri informativi ha dato vita a una serie di dibattiti pubblici sui temi più importanti che riguardano l'Islam e l'integrazione.

1. The project

1.1 Description of the project

Objectives

The project envisaged the implementation of several meetings in order to enhance the understanding and to make the communication easier between Muslim communities, local population and the administration.

Activities

The activities entailed:

- expert meetings: the Project started with 25 expert meetings, between February and May 2004, in order to determine which subjects were the most important points of conflict. These need to be addressed through the debate as they form actual obstructions to social cohesion and integration. The meetings indicated how the debates should be conducted and decided on the structure of the project. Two important conclusions emerged from these meetings: a) a number of sensitive subjects did not yet lend themselves to open discussion between Muslims and non-Muslims; b) public debates must suffer as little as possible from mutual misconceptions, preconceptions, and ignorance.- internal debates (within Muslim communities): In October 2004 a series of meetings and seminars (11) for the Muslim citizens only (mainly of Turkish, Moroccan and Somali origin). The purpose of these debates was twofold: firstly, to provide clarity with regard to the position of Muslims in Rotterdam society, their aims and ambitions, and - most importantly – their willing and their contribution to Rotterdam society; secondly, this internal debates aimed at facilitating the discussion on subjects which Muslims consider “sensitive”. The series of eleven internal debates - in which more than 1,500 Rotterdam Muslims took part - was rounded off with a closing meeting on 1 December 2004. On the basis of the internal debates it was concluded that several actions were expected from the (native) non-Muslim

community in Rotterdam. For example, that the interest of non-Muslims for the situation of Muslims in Rotterdam needs to be increased. Also, the participants stated that organizations and institutions in Rotterdam must be more open to Muslims. Particular reference was made to the broad discrimination experienced on the labour market. However, during all the internal debates, it became apparent that there was a willingness to seek out the causes of the ignorance among the non-Muslims and of the rift which had occurred, also within the Muslim community. For instance, from the debates it came out the Muslims need to take distance more clearly from some of the controversial ideas generally attributed to Islam, that are rather the mere result of traditions from the countries of origin (i.e.: infibulations practices) . It was also said that certain Muslim institutions, such as certain mosques, imams and self-organisations regarded by many Muslims as an obstacle to integration, must change. Another conclusion concerned the limited knowledge which many Muslims have of the Dutch language, making it difficult for them to participate fully in Rotterdam society. More effort needs to be invested in language improvement, in the first place by the Muslim community itself.

- Information meetings: in the second phase of the project, 10 information meetings were held in January 2005, attended by around 1,500 people. The meetings were directed at all Rotterdammers and were intended as preparation for the public debate. They provided participants with access to the same knowledge and background information about the subject in order to prepare for a fair and open debate. The meetings provided information to Muslims and non-Muslims with regard to each other's situation and backgrounds in order to close the mutual knowledge gaps that exist particularly in relation to subjects in which preconceptions or misconceptions play a part. The main themes were the diversity of Islam in Rotterdam and Rotterdam as a modern diverse city.

- Public debates: it emerged from the expert meetings and the internal debates that it is expected that Muslims make a stronger and concerted effort to integrate into Rotterdam society. It is expected that non-Muslims regard Muslims as equal fellow citizens of Rotterdam and that they make an active effort to involve more Muslims. The series of nine public debates took place in February and March 2005. The central subjects of the debates were those which had been determined during the internal debates and expert meetings: (1) "Us and them" feeling amongst Muslims and non-Muslims; (2) values and norms in the constitutional state and Islam; (3) position of women/equality of the sexes/homosexuality; (3) Islam as new religion in Rotterdam / the Church and the State; (4) Education and economic situation; and (5) safety and terror (added as a topical issue *inter alia* in connection with the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh).

Characteristically - it sounds logical but it never actually happens - the debate was conducted between citizens. It was not a debate between experts, or with bureaucrats, but for and by Rotterdammers. Each meeting was therefore lively and interactive, focusing on the exchange of viewpoints. All Rotterdam natives were welcome and were invited to give their opinion. In the same period, 20 smaller scale debates were held in various neighbourhoods. Throughout the whole period of the city debates, it was also possible to join in the debates online. The final public debate was held on 6 April 2005. The central question for this debate was how agreements can be made with each other and how the social basis for this can be further broadened. During the debates, the people of Rotterdam developed the building blocks for a Rotterdam

“Social charter”. These were prioritised and presented by the public during the closing meeting. Alongside the Mayor of Rotterdam, Ivo Opstelten, and the alderman for Social Integration, Leonard Geluk, speakers were the Dutch Prime Minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, and the Islam expert and philosopher Tariq Ramadan.

Results

The results of the debates “Islam & Integration” have fed into Rotterdam's project of “Social integration”, that promotes social cohesion and active citizenship. From the debates some reflections emerged, which are considered important for the success of dialogue and integration policy between Muslims and non-Muslims. The result was the high participation of Muslim communities that at a municipal level, were involved in the debate with no previous experience. Generally the initiatives run out by Public Administration does not overcome the single Seminar or the few numbers of meetings. The main success was due to the dual involvement, both of Muslim communities of immigrants and policy makers and administrators. Local media talk about this Project. In particular the Project received particular representations on EUMC (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia), who dedicated to this project a large report were interview to Muslim representatives and Muslim citizens can be found (for details, see: http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/index.php?fuseaction=content.dsp_cat_content&catid=43a17e680d287&contentid=43a27ee689b4c)

1.2 Time, structure and steps of the project

The Project started with 25 expert meetings, between February and May 2004, when the municipalità began to think about the need to develop a serious debate about Islam. The role of Islam in Rotterdam and the integration of Muslims are given special attention, since tensions exist between Muslims and non-Muslims. These tensions lead in practice to a rift between these population groups. The sometimes heated debate mixes abstract subjects (for example the separation of Church and State and the equality between men and women) with concrete controversies around the low degree of participation of women at various levels, domestic violence, the headscarf debate or the nuisance caused by young people parking near the mosque. These discussions generally take place behind closed doors, and shape majority attitudes towards Muslims. The city administration began to think that it is not wise to allow these discussions to keep simmering under the surface; thus the City considered instead they should be held openly so that the rift can heal.

1.3 Place and context

Rotterdam has a population almost half of which has foreign roots and which is rich in variety. There are big differences in skin colour, looks, ideas, religion, customs, behaviour and history. The reception and integration of migrants however imply several challenges. On the one hand, the diverse population requires and provides new services, different shops and reform of the cultural life. The strengthening of these aspects and making use of the talents of foreign born Rotterdammers are important for the social, cultural and economic climate in the city. On the other hand, the differences put pressure on community relations on the streets and in the neighbourhoods. This applies to values and norms and especially to behaviour in public areas. In particular the diversity management calls for a competent intervention towards Muslim communities, in order to create opportunities for an effective

dialogue. The Municipality of Rotterdam tried to give concrete possibilities to the construction of this dialogue, in particular considering the strong attention that the city gives to Muslim communities and their integration. Many young Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands identify strongly with Islam even if they have been in the Netherlands for quite a long time. However, they interpret Islam differently to the “Islam of the fathers”, especially if highly educated. Their Islam is individualistic and pluralistic, allowing room for a personal and selective experience of their faith, in which there is room for internal debate and tolerance towards other ways of thinking. In short: an Islam "made in the Netherlands" (Source: Report “*Islam in the multicultural society: The views of young people in Rotterdam*”, by K. Phalet, C. van Lotrigen, H. Entzinger, Utrecht University; http://www.ercomer.org/publish/reports/EN_Rot_Islam.html). Social Integration Office therefore included the dialogue with Muslim communities in Rotterdam political agenda. The City has worked to strengthen the bond of Rotterdam native citizens with each other and with the city.

1.4 Target

Muslim communities, Rotterdam citizens.

1.5 Methodology

The Project aimed at promoting social cohesion and active citizenship throughout the organisation of debates and the creation of a public arena where urgent and delicate topics could be discussed. The initiatives tried to enhance integration between Muslims and non-Muslims, throughout the creation of opportunities for dialogue. The methodology of the Project is based on the assumption that the dialogue is the instrument for the generation of knowledge on a specific culture. As a consequence the deeper knowledge of Muslim communities living in Rotterdam, allow Rotterdam native citizens to interact with Muslim on the basis of knowledge, by avoiding prejudice. The effort produced by the Project is linked to the willing of generating knowledge by dialogue and not by formal education or training activities. In order to let understand deeper the method chosen, it can be useful to report the assumptions of the project listed in the final report:

“A better society calls for active citizenship by all Rotterdammers. Citizens must accept responsibility and participate in society.

There must be acceptance of the fact that Muslims (Islam) form part of, and will continue to form part of, Rotterdam society.

There must be respect for the differences between people. Rotterdam is made up of a large collection of cultures, which all deserve a place in Rotterdam society.

The Constitution forms the legal framework within which people must shape their own lives. Both Muslims and non-Muslims must respect the Dutch constitutional state.”

1.6 Authors, Funding and Networks

Municipality of Rotterdam, Social Integration Project Bureau, Cooperation with Muslim communities (Moroccan, Turkish, Somali) is at the basis of the Project.

2. HINTS FOR AN EVALUATION

2.1. Strengths

2.1.1 The organisation's perspective

Many Muslims attended the debates. The closing debate attracted 1,500 people. The debates were held on a large scale, with hundreds of participants each time. In total, over 5,000 persons attended the small and large-scale debates. The majority opinion in the Rotterdam City Council is that the cycle of Islam debates was useful and successful. In the council debate held on the subject, there was particular praise for the professional approach and the public response.

Muslim communities admitted that the debates were very well organised.

The huge attendance allowed, in the Administration opinion, the setting up of a platform for channelling both tensions and positive emotions. Furthermore, the sense of community was given an impetus and the importance of everyone participating and speaking a common language emerged clearly.

2.1.2 Interculture map perspective

The Project represents a unique attempt to set up a real dialogue between Muslim and natives. In other contexts the debates on other cultures or on inter-religious dialogue were univocal organised and represented mostly the interest of an illuminated elite of intellectuals, researchers, professionals. The interesting element is the involvement of Muslim communities and the work done to give them the chance to be represented in public debates. Muslims were given the opportunity to play a role in these debates and to enhance their status and their self-awareness.

Another positive element to be pointed out, is the effort to consider Islam in Rotterdam as a constant changing reality: for instance, the evolution of the self representation as Muslim made by young Turkish or Moroccans living in Rotterdam, is the result of a continuous attempt to find solutions between the expectations of western modern society and what is prospected by the family and the culture of origin (respect of traditions, closeness to faith...). The phenomena that has been above cited above of the Islam made in the Netherlands is a good example that helps to define the new culture of Muslim citizens, as the synthesis between two world and two culture. The Municipality of Rotterdam has been capable of let this process come out from internal debate and public meetings, by avoiding cultural stigmatisation.

2.2. Critical points

2.2.1 The organisation's perspective

The organisation has also collected impression of participants to the events: some attendant affirmed that the debates often had a rather aggressive tone. So there was communication, but sometimes it was not of the kind that contributes to greater understanding.

Dialogue and mutual understanding should be stimulated on a smaller scale, close to all the people concerned, in their neighbourhood.

Both Muslim representatives and the Social Integration Bureau staff had the impression that most of the people present were mainly young, well-educated Muslims. Attendance was much lower among the non-Muslim inhabitants of Rotterdam, who were also expressly invited.

In the opinion of the municipal executive, however, certain issues were not featured enough. These "painful areas" are cultural topics identified by the organisation, which are (or can be) linked with Islam, and that need deeper reflection:

- Arranged marriages

- Discriminatory attitude and behaviour towards women
- Discriminatory attitude and behaviour towards homosexuals
- Problematic relations with those of a different faith / no faith
- Parent-child relationship (including the use of physical and emotional violence)
- Radicalisation

The restoration of social cohesion is considered as difficult to gain by the Project officers. The city authorities stated that they cannot foster a cohesive social fabric by themselves but it is the citizen who plays the decisive role in this endeavour. In their opinion citizens must see, get and use opportunities for contacts outside their own group; they must learn to relate constructively to the heterogeneity of their street, their neighbourhood, their city and a modern society. For this reason all investments in mutual knowledge and understanding “social integration” are directed at the advancement of active citizenship of all the population groups.

2.2.2: The Interculture map perspective

The project had a very ambitious objective, but, as some Muslim citizen noticed in a interview published on EUMC report (see the link above mentioned), it should be implemented closer to citizens. It seems, indeed, that the language of the whole Project was too much “institutional”. Perhaps, this kind of language has been useful for the first phase of the Project, because the Administration did not know well what to expect from debates. In a second phase of the Project, it would have been necessary to reach communities, in order to talk and to listen Muslim citizens that are not already reach out by services and institutions.

The results, agreements, etc., such as the “Social Charter”, should therefore be put into practice in order to avoid the risk that agreements remain a dead letter. Therefore, it could be useful to implement next stages within spaces and venues of Muslim communities (i.e.: mosque, Arabic schools.). This could be useful to reassure Rotterdam native population and to get a correct picture of Islam and the mosque, different from the one generally presented by the media.

2.3. Lessons learnt

2.3.1 The organisation's perspective

Themes: seminars and debate on Islam

Methodology: dialogues brings people closer together, and consent to work together on what binds them and try to combat the things that threaten them. The city should discuss and agree upon a shared sense of citizenship, within the confines of which there is room for different convictions. In this way, we can truly achieve a better common future for this beautiful city.

2.3.2 Interculture map perspective

Themes: seminars and debate on Islam

Methodology: the participation of both Muslim citizens and policy makers or administrators needs an high level of institutional responsibility: in order to export with success this initiative, a high stage of responsibility in disseminating tolerance and mutual understanding must be matured by the institution. It is important to work out relevant awareness about the role of institutions in implementing the dialogue.

At the same time, the good exportation of this initiative is the result of an effort to involve Muslim in actions that should not be perceived as merely institutional.

3. LINKS

www.rotterdam.nl/islam

Project website with contributes an reports

www.eumc.europa.eu

Sito dell'*European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia*, where a download is available the report "Perceptions of Discriminations and Islamophobia – Voices of Members of Muslim Communities" in the European Union (2006).