General Evaluation and cross analyses

Assessment of the "Faiths and Social cohesion" Project: What one can learn in the fight against discrimination

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Abstract

The European action named "Faiths and Social cohesion". Building up Social Participation in Religious Difference: Local Muslim Communities in Europe » was assessed during the last six months of the project. The objective was to assess the impact of the actions taken.

Keywords: Fight agains discrimination, religious discrimination, local actions assessment methods.

The European action named "Faiths and Social cohesion". Building up Social Participation in Religious Difference: Local Muslim Communities in Europe » was assessed during the last six months of the project. The objective was to assess the impact of the actions taken. Although one of IRFAM's recent members carried this out, it can still be considered as having been done independently as the researcher had taken part in no project activity of any kind before. Several data collection methods were used:

-   Content analysis of all the partners' reports from September 2002 to March 2004, and of other project documents;

-   Semi-structured interviews of researchers on the main project sites: Cheratte, Gent, Rome, Roubaix and Granada;

- Informal talks with some mosque representatives from Roubaix, Rome and Granada;

- Participants' observations during the project closing conference held in September 2004 and at the preparatory meetings in Liege and Brussels;

- Semi-structured interviews of the international project coordinators' team.

1. Overall intentions and success indicators

The "Faiths and Social cohesion" project is all about the fight against religious discrimination against Muslims in Europe at municipality level. From the word go partners have had a great many indicators to assess the quality of their actions:

- Concrete impact on how discrimination and treatment or recognition differences according to what part of the population one belongs to are understood by political and administrative staff, by the media and by European states' public opinions,

- Concrete impact on the same population by making social exclusion and psychological tension caused by religious discrimination better known,

- Discrimination or treatment differences decrease or disappearance in intensive action sites.

- The number and quality of negotiation mechanisms of dialogue, mediation, etc. set up so as to prevent religious or community tensions,

- The results of the above actions,

- Their duration and the duration of their effects,

- The project's products being welcome and resulting in peoples' mobilisation: meetings attendance rates, publications and public feedback,

- New practical perspectives to continue and enhance the project,

- Finally, partners have expressed the wish to go on acting together and to increase their number, beyond the project's first years.

These objectives, however, are not always expressed in terms of identifiable results and they remain essentially process centred: to fight religious and cultural discrimination by means of identifying and developing peoples' skills, by supporting their efforts, by modelising and spreading good practices etc. Two types of stakeholders will be particularly supported: municipality representatives and communities' religious associations' delegates.

Recommended performance indicators seem rather vague: they have to do with knowledge, understanding for very large populations, negotiation mechanisms, prevention and erasing of discrimination or treatment differences without mentioning which ones. The project has therefore not been written according to strategic rules. It sets its targets on the basis of a problem tree and in terms of tangible results. Courses of actions to take have to be set on the assumption that, firstly, the production of knowledge and understanding stimulates change and, secondly, that community mediation and intercultural negotiation are necessary to decrease religious discrimination, and, thirdly, that people need to change before institutions can do so too.

The initial project does not mention a structured plan of actions. Instead, it has a list of actions to take at local and international levels:

- Set up negotiation, information, coordination, consultation, dialogue, awareness, and mediation mechanisms at the service of Muslim populations and of their delegates, and at the service of local decision makers, whether elected or employed at municipality administration offices or at social and education bodies in the widest sense.

- Give these mechanisms new impetus where they already exist so as to deal with religion related conflicts between communities and institutions.

- Help set up unions among Muslim communities to let new interlocutors to be identified out of that community.

- Issue and distribute professional information papers for all audiences (brochures …), including wishes, claims, and opinions coming from Muslims as well as local political and association decision makers.

- Launching events that promote minority Muslim citizens: exhibitions, etc.

- Encourage people to get through and out of situations where locally identified Muslim populations are discriminated against and treated differently.

- Launch training sessions and actions to ease intercultural communication by letting the parties state their opinions. This should make it possible to find targets and stakes that are common to both communities and institutions, i.e. work together towards improved living conditions in the municipality.

- Set quality indicators according to the given context to assess actions together. This would make it easier for people to express their opinions, it would reveal new skills and enhance the old ones, it would improve social and cultural welfare, etc.

- Issue common international publications that deal with the history of Muslim populations in various countries, their daily lives, their feelings, some analytical articles, along with action plans, achievements, conclusions and perspectives of the project in terms of good practice in the fight against local religious discrimination.

- Widely distribute these publications to the media and by means of conferences and public presentations, thereby facilitating an open debate.

- Identify incidents where the target population are discriminated against, in the historical background of Muslim presence in Europe ; produce a common analysis and vision of the mechanisms that are behind that type of discrimination and issue practical recommendations to be validated and applied al local level.

- Draw the attention of European, national, and local decision makers, public opinions, media, and European citizens on the issue.

This list makes it possible to see more clearly the setting up of mechanisms and of meeting places (that tend to have an institutional dimension), as well as the identification of indicators that implies the will to have changes assessed on an uninterrupted basis. Hence the presence in this project, albeit implicitly, of practically all the components of an overall anti-discrimination strategic plan. These components can be represented by the circular graph below, inspired by Lederach (1997), Sensi *and al.* (2003) and Sensi (2000).

Diagnosis phase and context analysis (I)

Crisis management or management of ongoing files

Discrimination prevention by means of information, awareness raising and people training actions

Setting up a monitoring and follow-up indicators system

Making a strategic plan with an action timetable on several years

Changing under-systems and systems by means of new and long-term institutional mechanisms

New anti-discrimination legal framework

Diagnosis and context analysis phase (II)

Etc.

The diagnosis phase, the critical situations resolution, awareness raising and training are related to people oriented actions whereas system transformation action plans and the monitoring system are more related to institutions. In order to implement long-term changes, both courses of action are necessary. However, it takes time for all actions to be carried out simultaneously. What matters is to realise that each one is a door which, when opened, leads to other ones.

The « Cults and Cohesion » project's intention is to be open to all these phases except to a strategic plan that would include an action timetable for the fight against religious discrimination spread over several years.

2. What local strategies are best suited to what types of religious discrimination?

The table below summarises the strategic choices made by local teams whose actions are described in the previous chapters. It shows that all teams chose to work *"bottom-to-top"* rather than *"top-to-down",* and rather *"bottom"* than *"top"*. Most efforts focussed on the first three courses of action that take place essentially where the stakeholders lead their daily lives and the institutional dimension has so far not been particularly emphasised.

Strate-gic. Sites	Diag-nosis	Crisis solu-tion	Aware-ness cam-paign, coach-ing and train-ing	Stimu-lat. or setting up of stable mecha nisms	Anti-discrim. action plan	Moni-toring system and fol-low-up indicator
Cher-atte	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Gent	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Gra-nada	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Rome Cento-cel.	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Rome Cin-quina	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no
Rou-baix	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no

Diagnosing or identifying discrimination acts and their causes is the first strategic step to take: as stated by Scharf (2003, 9), religious discrimination is a relatively recent theme and it has been little documented. This is why project leaders decided to start it by launching a detailed research plan about the part played by Muslim communities in various backgrounds and about the religious discrimination they face. This analysis was done on two levels: each team was asked to carry out a local survey and an international team of experts was asked to produce more general conclusions on various themes. The results of these have been collected in books and articles that were published during the project.

The observed discrimination acts can be classified into five groups as follows:

1. The *« identity »* dimension that, in the case of Islam, includes all what it means for each person to "be a Muslim every day" (clothing, food, health, hygiene, education, public vs. private life, etc). Examples of discrimination acts experienced individually and collected by the projects are, among others: denying, rejecting, suspicion, disdain, humiliation, indifference and indolence, un-availability of the interlocutor, verbal and physical violence, administrative harassment, etc.

2. The « *social organisation*» dimension is the backbone of relations between people and groups (male/female relations, age relations, family relations, the community, associations, organisation or mosques organisation …). Acts of discrimination include: denying the existence of the community, not taking on board the communities diversity, forcing some communities to gather when they are in fact incompatible, not recognising or validating representatives as such, Muslim families being devaluated by social, education and health care institutions, blockings due to the confusion between cultural and social functions of the mosques-associations, the difficulties, and even the impossibility to organise language, culture, and religion classes etc.

3. The « *values, beliefs, and spirituality* » dimension has to do with the definition of good and evil, the relationship with God and with the spiritual world, denial of Islam or public attempts to make it be perceived as evil, its systematic association with terrorism, …

4. The « *cultural practices*» dimension has to do with daily and weekly prayers, rites of passage (births, marriages, deaths, festivals,), etc. Examples include financial discriminations (state funded cults being attributed or not, discrimination to do with facilities and equipment (lacking spaces, run down or inadequate, …), administrative and red tape related discrimination (licence applications being turned down, extremely slow and complex procedures, …), freezing political decision making processes, frequent amendments in local/municipal regulations, not taking account of the religious practices specificities, etc.

5. The « *institutional* » dimension (concerning the status of imams, places of cults' managers, and opinion leaders, etc) has

examples such as the absence of recognition, consultation and support for the cult's delegates.

The documents analysis and meetings with the researchers made it possible to identify three types of causes for the above-mentioned discrimination; they are of institutional, organisational, and individual nature.

-   Discrimination can be partly attributed to *the host community's institutional framework.* This directly involves the responsibility of European states that do not find solutions to the problem of recognising mosques. Here are a few examples: little known or little publicised anti-discrimination legislation in local public services, absence or ignorance of legislations concerning the Muslim cult at various levels of public administration… Besides, applications and formalities to get subsidies for cult places or associations are tedious and complex and require writing skills that are usually not well developed in the immigrant populations, of which Muslims in Europe are often part. Administrations offices sometimes tend to deal with religion related files in a purely technocratic manner and tend not to associate with them any sense for the sacred, which in turn is perceived as denial among Muslim communities.

-   One has to say that treatment differences at the expense of Muslims can also be attributed to the very *functioning of the Islamic associations or of the mosques.* The observations have shown a lack of professionalism in managing the said associations, which can discredit them with public services. There can also be significant internal disputes within and among the Muslim associations and communities. Identifying interlocutors and representativescan sometimes be made difficult. It should be noted that in the cities in question there are no real Muslim federations and the existing federative structures are not really representative of the various communities or of the various feelings.

-   *The individual mentality of the representatives of local public services* can also be at the root of religious or islamophobic discrimination phenomena. Behind this emotional fact, there is mistrust or paternalism on the part of some influent local agents. However, discrimination sometimes has its origin in poor knowledge of the anti-discrimination legislative framework, as is the case for cult management, or a poor knowledge of the needs and the diversity of the Muslim communities. Some observations have also shown that some decision makers, some administrative staff members, or

some social workers lack skills in mediation and conflict management or diversity management.

- Finally, the *functioning of people from Muslim communities* is also a source of discrimination or self-discrimination. Again, on an emotional level, fear of the other, closed attitudes and mistrust can be found. The above-mentioned people do not have sufficient knowledge of rights, duties, and administrative regulations that can be of use. As far as skills are concerned members of the Muslim immigrant communities sometimes find it hard to manage associations, to solve internal conflicts, to communicate about the richness of Islam, about its history…

All these causes can be observed on all visited sites with however specificities those are essentially attributable to the history and to historical disputes. In Northern countries such as France and Belgium, the relations of the public services with the mosques associations are heavily influenced by the fight for state secularisation and sometimes, secularity has become synonym with the fight against all forms of religion whatsoever. In Southern countries, in Rome (and particularly in the Vatican) and in Granada (last Islamic stronghold for the Catholic kings who won back Spain); the space made for Muslim presence in the city depends mostly on the outlet of the battles.

The above analysis is only a very short synthesis of the diagnosis made by the project researchers. However, it shows very well how fully relevant the project is as it indeed meets the needs that were considered in the very framework of the activities. Many months and much energy have been spent in order to carry out this stage and in order to write the publications. This investment seems to us fully justified as far as few surveys have been made on this subject. Besides, the first rule of an efficient fight against discrimination is for the discrimination to be *recognised, named, identified, analysed…* Discrimination can go undetected and undenounced for centuries (in the part of both those discriminated against and those that are not discriminated against), simply because it is necessary to allow the dominant social system to function without having to change, whatever the inequalities may be. Gender inequalities are in this field a major example.

The first stage for change to come about is therefore wording and quantifying the issue to get an objective view of the injustices experienced by the groups that are discriminated against. Religious circles are often still reluctant to admit the idea of discrimi-

nation. Even some project researchers were reluctant to do so! During each site visit, the first assessment action was to identify with them what specific types of discrimination were present. Much to our surprise, particularly after we had read reports that, for their part, were quite clear, all parties expressed that they had found it difficult to identify precisely the types of discrimination they were working on, arguing that discrimination acts experienced by Muslim communities were more linked to their status as disadvantaged immigrants than to religious practices and toi the thought of Islam as being a dimension to be considered as part of all the other ones as a whole, as if, in the project title, the wording « social cohesion » were more important than the word « cult ».

Researchers clearly stated that the idea behind this was to put the issue in its broader context. This approach is indeed important, but it goes hand in hand with the risk of loosing *focus* in the research-action and of diluting the religious aspects in a wide-ranging study, albeit easier to accept or more « politically correct » in the current geopolitical context.

The table below shows the various types of religious discrimination looked at during each of the actions that were visited during the assessment. It makes it possible to identify which discrimination dimensions were worked on in particular on every « Faiths and Social cohesion » project site.

We can see that the two most recurrent dimensions are community aspects and cultural practices. One should note however that « the cult » was dealt with at once in Gent, Roubaix, and Granada, as the community dimension had been worked on so as to speed up the queue of administrative files. On the contrary Cheratte and Rome had worked mostly on the « social cohesion » front and cult related problems were dealt with indirectly. Here we are talking about two different doors and deciding which one to open first is probably based on the reasons below:

- Researchers' position and experience in the field,

- History, presence, democratic strength of the communities and associations in the area,

- Negotiation and openness context in which public services and Muslim communities interact,

It can also be noted that the institutional representatives that come into play vary according to which door was opened. In

Cheratte and Rome social and education services are the ones that were most involved along with some representatives of the partner mosque or of the Muslim community. In Gent, Roubaix, and Granada institutional involvement seems to have been wider ranging: city council services whose specialised task is to deal with cult related issues. It was necessary to involve a wider network of Muslim institutional stakeholders.

Dimensions / Site	Identity	Community, relations and social links	Spirituality	Cultural practices and religious rites	Institutional systems
Cheratte		Poor recognition of the mosque-association and financial discrimination	Poor recognition of religious diversity		
Gent				cemetery	
Roubaix		Devaluation of the mosque-association		New place of cult being built	
Rome Centocelle		Invisibile and isolated community and mosque			
Rome Cinquina		Invisible and denied community		Worthy religious practice impossible	
Granada		Invisible and denied community and associations and mosques		No place of cult or cemetery	Problem with the validity of representatives

3. Lessons one can learn from the «Faiths and Social cohesion» project

3.1. The analysis of the cases here above has tought us several things concerning *crisis management*. Let's start by saying that all stakeholders and participants that were met said that it was necessary to have a first stage were the people involved were to be identified. The duration of that stage has often been underestimated because field situations are too complex and too little known. This first stage has also made it possible to understand that it was important to spend time on emotional issues, that, in turn, had also often been underestimated. On the sites quite a long period of time had to be spent on confidence building with public authorities and Muslim communities alike. To gain the collaboration of civil servants the researchers had to show their expertise, their knowledge of the legislative framework or their skills in terms of intercultural relations. They set fears and fantasies about the Muslim cult and about daily family life into context, they made them objective, they relativised them and defused them. To become trusted with communities and mosques associations, researchers came to visit on a regular basis, they showed empathy, they recognised the problems that were experienced on a daily basis and they even got to know Islam better as some of them are of Muslim or immigrant origin, and some became actively involved in the writing of some files. The trust building process took more or less time according to whether researchers had been on the sites before or not. For exemple, in Belgium and France, the teams had been interlocutors for several years with mosques and public services, unlike Rome and Granada where communication started with the project.

The researchers' expertise was being recognised as well as their institutions in the various themes have been strong points in finding sotutions to the problems. Mediation and intercultural negotiation seem to have been at the centre of all actions taken by the teams. In some particularly sensitive areas, it is sometimes a good idea to use an indirect entry, such as children's schooling, in order to start talking about religious issues. It seems that files have been made easier to treat when visible public events were held and because the action has a European character.

In terms of results and depending on the researchers it has indeed been possible with these two approaches to unlock the files concerning cemetaries (Gent and Granada) and the building of the

mosque (Roubaix) and to make them move on towards solution finding. It has also been possible to enhance visibility and to enhance the role of the associations in all the cities involved in the project.

3.2. *Awareness raising and training people working on site* was done by a support and coaching system based on the *learning by doing method.* Approach specificities between coaching representatives of public services and coaching mosque associations cannot be identified because differences are linked to the teaching contents.

As far as civil servants are concerned, the work seems to have focused on the knowledge and the mastering of legislative frameworks, on attitudes such as listening and looking, on the ability to negotiate in a multicultural context. As far as associations' leaders are concerned, the focus was set on strengthening the ability to communicate, expressing requests in such a way that they could be understood by public services, creating and developing files and managing and organising the association.

On all sites the teams trained stable relays : teachers, social workers, an intercultural mediator, representatives of the mosque group, leaders of intercultural associations … They too were coached, albeit in a more structured way and with more follow-up, as it was first necessary to identify those concerned, to motivate them (sometimes financially), to entrust them with responsibilities on precise tasks. The most structured training programme took place in Rome and was addressed to teachers; another one took place towards the end phase of the project at Visé-Cheratte.

Talking with the teams gave us the impression that they had not defined very clear strategies in the training process and that this may be where the improvised most. This deficit in target and method setting does in no way mean that *coaching* was inefficient. However, its results are hard to pinpoint because the training programme was not formally assessed.

Most people that were met agree to say that there have been significant changes in openness. On the contrary, it has been more difficult to identifiy with them what skills had been developed, particularly as some researchers admit that, for reasons to do with efficiency or impatience vis-à-vis some reluctance they were faced with, they sometimes tended to do things themselves rather than to limit themselves to being coached.

Researchers were more assertive when commenting on what they had learned. The project appears to have allowed them to improve significantly their knowledge and their skills in a new field, where expertise is still quite scarce. It also prompted each researcher to reflect on their own relation with religion, with their reference framework and with their own prejudices and stereotypes.

3.3. *Stimulating or creating institutional mechanisms* is without doubt the first strategy that can guaranty durability in the fight against religious discrimination. It was part of the projects' intentions and most teams paved the way in this direction. Two mechanism stimulation approaches can be identified: in Gent there is the Gent mosques forum and in Rome there is the intercultural commission of the education system. The project made it possible to set up a mechanism that gathered mosques associations in Granada. Meeting and dialogue places or spaces were set up too: in Cheratte/Visé, there is now an inter-religious and inter-philosophical forum where teachers and youth workers can meet. In Gent there is a permanent round-table where mosques and public services meet.

No site has considered the idea of setting up a committee or an anti-discrimination observatory within the public services. The Muslim cult national federations were not consulted during this research-action except when taking part in international conferences.

3.4. *The idea of setting up an action plan againt discrimination acts that would include a multiannual actions schedule in favour of the fight against religious discrimination* has not been suffitiently considered. Similarly to the former strategy, setting up a plan is of utmost importance to make actions last in time but this has not been stated in the projects' intentions list. However, one can assume that this sort of plan can be made in the future, based on the recommendations to be found at the end of the process. The « Faiths and Social cohesion » project is but a first step on the way to building an international and multidisciplinary network that wishes to pursue its action. There is more: at all local sites partners wish to go on working together after the European project is finished and efforts are being made to find various types of financial support.

3.5. *Setting up a monitoring and follow-up system* is the last strategy to be considered. It was part of the projects' intentions but none of the teams on the field worked towards that goal. However,

the international experts' recommendations on this issue, among other incentives, may pave the way for a breakthrough in this area.

4. Conclusions

In its intentions the project has virtually all the stages for a strategy of fight against all forms of discrimination (diagnosis of discrimination acts, crisis management, discrimination prevention, systems transformation and monitoring system). However, it lacks one of the important stages that are necessary for anchoring changes on an institutional level: that of setting up a strategic plan that would include a multiannual action plan.

On all sites, most energy was spent on the first three approaches: diagnosis, conflict management, and coaching. The dominant perspective was to work first and foremost at grassroots level. Since the institutional aspect was not chosen as the main entryway the time limit of the project was such that this dimension could not be developed extensively. The idea that leads the initiative was to create a list of religious discrimination indicators based on the international experts' work.

Several publications on the diagnosis of the situations and the discrimination acts experienced by Muslim communities have been issued locally and internationally and they show how fully relevant the project has been. The problems that were pinpointed by the researchers reflect five types of religion related discrimination: individual discrimination acts experienced as an identity attack, acts experienced by the community, cult related administrative and technocratic discrimination, discrimination linked to spirituality and to institutions.

Ground level actions focussed essentially on the fight against community discrimination and cult practice linked discrimination:

- In Gent, Roubaix, and Granada the cultural aspect was the main entry way (cemetaries and new mosque), and community aspects were worked on in order to make files move ahead.

- In Cheratte and Rome, the community dimension was mostly morked on and cult related problems were dealt with indirectly.

None of the files was fully solved during the project. The exploratory action mostly resulted in identifying the problems and

helped them move on in the right direction. Three types of discrimination sources were highlighted in this process:

- Individual causes (fears and mistrust, deficient knowledge of the other and of their reference framework, lack in intercultural competences, etc);

- Public institutions related causes (failure to apply anti-discrimination or cult management legislations strictly, complex administrative procedures …);

- Cult associations related causes (poor professionalism in management and organisation, difficulty to gather into a federation, etc.).

The preferred approach to help change people has been *coaching* or a systematic accompaniment of some people working on the ground. In Rome teachers were trained according to a structured programme, but in other places coaching was not done according to a formalised strategic plan. It was done according to people's intuitions and deductions and according to opportunities. Because of this informality it is impossible to identify and quantify what people have learned and how much they have changed. However, the people that were interviewed say that there have been significant changes in attitudes (trust, look and listening quality), in knowledge in various themes and in communication, negotiation and file-building skills in the field of religious diversity management.

Systems and associations transformation is just as hard to measure because the changes at stake have not been precisely defined beforehand. However, the people that were interviewed say that partner institutions now seem more open, more flexible, and more expert. In the same way partner Muslim associations and mosques seem to speak with more satisfaction about their feelings about openness, communication, management, organisation and networking.

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