

Diversity is our challenge and opportunity

Hilde Ballière Farner

If for a moment we reflect on the word "diversity" independently from the issue of immigration, I think we would agree that diversity stands for something rather positive in our societies. It is a fundamental condition for making choices – for opportunities – and we consider freedom of choice almost as a human right. Diversity may apply on anything from types of soap, make of cars or their different models to choice of education and work – choosing your husband or wife. We even state that freedom of religion and hence diversity in religious beliefs is a fundamental right.

On the other hand, when it comes to having people of an other colour of skin, from other societies and cultures as our neighbours, or to experience that people of an origin unlike our own have the same possibilities and

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rights as we have in our society – at that moment diversity seems to turn into a problem.

Asylum policies and integration

I would want to spend some words on asylum policies – the energy all governments use for controlling immigration – for keeping people out, to be frank. The way I see it this has bearing on the issue of the conditions for integration and for diversity.

Asylum policies bear evidence of the fact that European nations think they will be able to cope with the very phenomenon of immigration. They work very hard on making rules and arrangements that hopefully will work. I am sorry to say, but there is no doubt in my mind that this line of work will fail.

One can't simply favour an open world – globalisation – solely on issues that give you benefits. As long as there are wars, there will be refugees. As long as there are enormous differences in standard of living from one country to another – from one continent to another – there will be migration. The flow of people obviously will

go from the poor areas to the rich ones – from the war haunted ones to the stable ones.

Professor Zygmund Baumann dwelled in his contribution at the 7th International Metropolis Conference in Oslo in September this year on the same issue saying (I quote) "Nomadic capital in search of profitable markets and comfortable stopovers; uprooted and unsettled, vagabond populations in search of work, bread, drinking water or peace – these are just two of the "globally created problems" which no local powers have the resources to tackle on their own – though they have to cope with the consequences"

Professor Baumann is pretty pessimist on local and even national authorities' ability to cope even with the consequences. He thinks that mostly they transpose the problem from the level where it is created to a far lower one – one that they seem to master, where they seem to have measures that may give the population the impression that the immigrant problem may be solved, and hence give them a kind of feeling of security.

I can hear a lot of objections to any proposition to reduce the use of energy on trying to keep people

out. Objections would among others have to do with the issue of economically inspired migration and with criminality. I am sorry not to have time to pursue this. And what I am saying is not that countries should open their frontiers to anybody who wants to come.

My point is that governments through their very restrictive asylum policies, send out some pretty strong signals on how they really think that immigration is no good, that one should find a way of stopping it – except of course labour immigrants on fields where we need to import labour – and except football players that may give our nation cups and championships.

This basic attitude and the rather extreme focus from governments' side on separating the "good" immigrants from the "bad" ones, clearly supports, and in a way is a fertilizer for ordinary people's fears, prejudices etc. and is negative to diversity and far from favourable to integration.

I think we should clearly moderate – or maybe change direction to the amount of energy, labour force and money we use on trying to differentiate among people who have more or less overwhelming grounds to try to come to our countries. Let's find some simple, straight forward criteria – criteria that do not discriminate people – to control – to portion up the inevitable flow of people who want a bit of our riches and security.

Let's on the other hand increase our effort on providing all inhabitants with opportunities. Let's use the same mechanisms that we claim are at the base of our welfare: give them opportunities – let them use their resources,

adapt the educational system to their conditions of live, give them a real possibility for social and professional mobility and let us give room for diversity.

The Canadian example

Canada has on that issue chosen a rather different approach. They got the worlds first multiculturalism policy. It states very clearly that you don't have to abandon your own culture or your own language to become a Canadian. Come as you are! You are OK the way you are. We, Canadians are for multiculturalism – not for assimilation.

This policy does not imply that Canada has no problems related to immigration, or has no racism, but it gives the population (immigrant as ethnical Canadian) a far more positive platform for building a diversified society – no doubt about that. This policy establishes a social climate that favours integration – and still does not make it into a strait-jacket. And mind, integration surely is not the same thing as becoming alike – integration has basically nothing to do with assimilation. Integration in itself gives a lot of space for diversity.

What makes the Canadian policy especially interesting for us, is the fact that it leaves no place for the dichotomy of "we" and "they" which is very dominant in European countries. Manuela Ramin-Osmundsen, leader of the Norwegian Centre against ethnical discrimination describes the base of this dichotomy by stating that ethnical Norwegians on the one hand are very critical to the Nor-

wegian society and policies – impressively so, she says: they are very realistic on the drugs problem, they are critical to the way we treat the elderly, to health policy, to the problem of divorce and of growing up in divided families, of abortion and suicide etc. In that kind of discussion, she says, the minority population is virtually invisible and absent.

On the other hand, from the moment one starts speaking of immigration and integration, they become completely self-defensive, and emphasise Norwegian values as universal and good. They – the immigrant population – lack respect and will not let themselves be integrated – that means behave and become like Norwegians. I think that most of you basically recognize this description. It does not only apply on Norwegians.

A barrier against communication

Furthermore the same dichotomy really acts as an efficient barrier against communication. Instead of developing the integration concept in a dialogue between "us" and "them", "we" are the ones who really define what it means for immigrants to be integrated in our societies – how much – or little – diversity we really accept.

Of course all integration will necessarily have an element of adaptation and assimilation in it. The national laws have to be respected – we can't tamper with that. One can't act in a society without a certain knowledge of

the majority language. One has to know the basics of the current social code. Those and a lot of other things can't be coped with otherwise than by adaptation. We should recognize this.

So, the dialogue I ask for, is not a completely free one. At the base there would be claims from the host country. On the other hand there would be some basic claims from the immigrants' side. Corresponding to the claims and duties one would have rights following being part of the particular society.

As far as I can see, the western societies are very vague and indistinct when it comes to communicating their demands and their offer to the immigrant population. Things currently may be changing on that point... This vagueness must really be very difficult for immigrants to interpret... which may give cause to a lot of misunderstandings and conflicts.

We often wait until something dramatic happens before we communicate our claims. It is at those moments that our claims and expectations get visible. But since this process of clarifying takes place on an emotionally very engaging moment, the claims are often put forward more as claims for "punishments" than as normal, legitimate "claims".

One could give a lot of examples – some from everyday situations and some concerning questions of more fundamental nature – where a solution based on communication clearly would have given a better outcome, and would have favoured integration and diversity, and at the same time contributed to loosening up (bit by bit) on discriminating attitudes in

all of the population. Let me give you one example:

In the town of Drammen in Norway, we have some 15 religious sects – Christian sects. All of them have churches – of course, Norway practices freedom of religion and of practising it. No one ever thought twice when sects applied for building a church. But at the moment the Islamic community started speaking about building a mosque in Drammen, the idea met a lot of opposition. Why? Some people of course were against the idea on a purely religious base. I think that their arguments should have been clearly and openly rejected by the local authorities as contrary to the principle of freedom of religion and practice of them. This should have been done, but it wasn't, which illustrates once again the vagueness from the part of the authorities – this time vagueness on communicating the rights of the immigrant people.

Other arguments against had to do with architecture, others with fear for having a priest calling out prayers from a powerful sound installation at regular hours etc. For me this would have been a splendid occasion for communication with representatives of the religious congregation at hand. The angle should have been: How may we (local authorities and immigrant groups) together prepare the ground for a mosque in Drammen (which is a legitimate claim from the part of the immigrants) while at the same time not to offend people's opinion of what is acceptable and what is not in Drammen – identifying the strict claims of both parts. What is negotiable and what is not?

What is integration about?

The word integration means according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary "Combine something in such a way that it becomes fully a part of something else" and "...become fully a member of a community, rather than remaining in separate groups".

As I pointed out earlier, this is no synonym to "becoming alike" – of giving up diversity. On the contrary it implies giving people opportunities... which they within the limits of the law and with respect for other people, traditions etc... may use, as they feel appropriate to their needs and goals.

Examining the various European countries' policies for integration, one will observe that being integrated – "becoming part of" a society basically means that one has a place to live, a job to go to, a basic knowledge of the majority language and a rough knowledge of the basic institutions of society and how they work. Some of the documents also mention participation in society life as a quality for integration – in my opinion a very important one.

As a description of the elementary needs this is OK. But those are not really strategies for integration. Having a place to live and a job does not make one integrated – it provides the minimum base for starting the integration work.

I am of course fully aware that governments and local authorities acknowledge the meaning of, and even provide the funding for, for instance cultural measures, for building up arenas where immigrants and others meet and get to know each other, etc. etc. But the

official policy itself has a pretty narrow perspective – a far too narrow perspective, in my opinion anyway, to be able to act as a strategy for immigration.

I will not spend a lot of words illustrating that the majority of immigrants meets problems when they try to get a job, or that the standard of their houses is inferior to ours. We all know that. What we also know is that many of them furthermore are not welcome as tenants or as neighbours when they try to get a place to live.

I read about a young girl – Asian as I remember – living in a city in Europe, her parents had well paid high status jobs. They had bought a high standard house in a fashionable neighbourhood. At some point in this girls education, her headmaster discovers that her family has moved – they now lived in a typical immigrant area. When asked about it, the girl told the headmaster their story of having a life in physical comfort – but in complete isolation. No one in the fashionable area ever said or did anything actively discriminating or racist. They just oversaw the Asian family – they were completely ignored. So, they decided to move back to an area of far less status and riches, and chose feeling accepted, and integrated. There is the real scene for integration work, and a very difficult one to work on, at that.

Then there are numerous stories of immigrants who have got work, but are completely isolated on their working place. Others seem to be accepted and integrated – but are never given the opportunity for development – by promotion or simply by getting

new and more challenging tasks. Those are the real areas for working with integration.

Integration projects

Apart from a number of very good exceptions, it seems to me that projects aiming at improving integration often take a rather narrow approach to the issue. They reflect the narrow concept of integration that we find in the official documents. They may work on employment for immigrants, meaning getting them a job. And of course those projects may show very good results – in the sense that many immigrants get jobs. On the other hand they seldom follow up the newly employed immigrant to check up on what kind of working life he really has to put up with. And they seldom set focus on the enterprises, the existing culture inside the enterprise etc... Projects tend to focus on technical sides of integration, and seem not very keen on including the human sides.

Again we seem to assume that if the immigrant doesn't feel happy with his work, or firm or colleagues, or possibilities for making career – this is the immigrants fault – never the fault of the working places.

The Rogaland Forskning – a research institution in western Norway – has together with the biggest employer organization identified this range of problems and worked out a programme for businesses on how to prepare for accepting immigrant workers or employees. This programme focuses on "our" (ethnic western Europeans') attitudes and behav-

our – on how we are part of conflicts – and sometimes are the ones who introduce them – on the culture of the firm in question. It also provides a training as to help the enterprise to avoid or become able to cope with difficult situations and conflicts. That seems to me to be an important supplement to the get-people-into-jobs projects. In combination with both the technical bit and the bit about working conditions, this seems to me to be a far more powerful way of working for integration – and at the same time may pave the way for increasing acceptance for diversity. We have to realize that "we" often are an important part of typical problems that arise where immigrants and "natives" meet.

Professor Jan Svennevig from the Institute of Nordic languages and Media at the Agder Highschool has studied how public executive officers communicate with immigrants. He found that linguistic misunderstandings on a daily base are interpreted as the effects of cultural differences. Communication between people, who have a very asymmetrical level of knowledge of the language used, is of course very difficult. Professor Svennevig thinks we should give our public officers some education on communication. Maybe we should offer a similar education to businesses or neighbourhoods.

In a qualification and getting a job project me and my colleagues are introducing, we will invite the participants into follow-up groups – for instance a group where problems of working conditions and the like may be discussed and initiatives for im-

provement may be prepared. Or groups for women who obviously have some very tough barriers to cross when they try to get themselves an education and a job. Through those informal groups we also will encourage the participants to practise codetermination in the project itself such as to be able to meet the participants on what they feel is the problem – at the same time we think that those measure may give a good training for participation in society!

Furthermore we plan to give the participants' past a concrete expression. Has it occurred to you that immigrants very often are treated as if they do not have a past. I think of this as a big injustice to the people concerned.

For anyone (immigrants or others) being shown interest in one's past, is a kind of confirmation of himself or herself. Using this fact positively it may contribute to reducing the "we" and "they" feeling on both sides. And I think it

would bring about a raise of self-confidence in the person or persons concerned.

This is of course no ultimate solution. But by introducing elements of compassionate values and adding them to a project that has a technical goal, and by involving all parties that are part of the project, we think we may be able to approach the big challenge of integration in a more holistic way. And we think that this "method" may improve the long term outcome of the projects.

Conclusion

I have not covered the whole theme of integration and diversity – the challenges and opportunities. That would really have been impossible. But I have tried to give you something to reflect upon when you later on discuss projects.

I hope that I have stated that I think that integration and diversi-

ty may very well and really should go hand in hand. That the base to succeed with both of them lies in being very distinct in communicating both claims and offer to the immigrant population, and to be very consequent in following up that part.

I don't think that I have given you the impression that I think that integration and building the diversified multicultural society comes easily. Because it doesn't. On the contrary, as one works at cultures that have to melt together and end up in diversity, we talk about pretty far off goals.

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