

Civil Society Participation in Intercultural Dialogue

Manuel Manonelles*

1. Civil Society & Intercultural Dialogue

1.1. Civil Society, a Definition

This is neither the place nor the time to comprehensively address the unsolved question of the definition of a complex reality such as civil society. Although important work has been done in trying to find a clear and shared definition of this key actor, both the theoretical – social sciences¹ – and the practical – e.g. the United Nations context² – dimensions have failed up now to reach to a common agreement on it.

The following are the parameters of the concept of civil society in which this article is based. With this I am not intending to propose «the» definition of civil society, one that excludes others, but to clarify the conceptual framework in which this article is driven. For instance, usually I do include the Academia – referring specially to the academics – as part of civil society, but in this case, I exclude it. And this is due to mainly two reasons: on the one side, for the very nature of the issue discussed (intercultural dialogue); and on the other, for the very particular role that the Academia and academics do play in this area, which enormously differs from the ones played by other civil society actors. Therefore, in this case by excluding the Academia from the definition, the role of the specific actor – civil society – in a specific field – intercultural dialogue – becomes much more clear and coherent.

Having said so, in this article civil society is to be understood as an actor defined by being non-governmental, non-profit, organised and genuine. While the two first concepts are clear, the two final ones may deserve some clarification.

By «organised» I mean a group of people that they coordinate themselves, in whatsoever manner, in order to achieve a specific

* Director, Foundation for a Culture of Peace, Barcelona.

¹ One of the most relevant examples of academic research is the one undertaken by the London School of Economics at its Centre for Civil Society (www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/) and its Centre of Global Governance (www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/researchgcsresearch.htm) being its flagship, since 2001, the *Global Civil Society Yearbook*. Likewise, the Hauser Center for Non-Profit Organisations at Harvard (www.hks.harvard.edu/hauser/) deserves special attention, among others.

² See the *Cardoso Panel Report on UN-Civil Society Relations* formally known as the *We the Peoples: Civil Society, the United Nations and Global Governance. Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations* (United Nations General Assembly document A/58/817 of June 2004), and the controversy that followed to it.

goal, or to work towards one concrete direction. It necessary excludes the «citizen» or the «individual» whose contribution might be of high interest, but defers from collective action. However, it clearly includes non-hierarchical self-organised groups, better known as social movements, even in the case that they define themselves as «non-organised» actors.

By «genuine» I mean those actors which are value-based, which share some sort of humanist and internationalist approach, that they work for the common good, etc. Specifically, and this is the main reason of including this concept, I explicitly exclude those actors that take the form of civil society organisations (CSOs) – non-governmental, non-profit and organised – but do work for other goals in a more or less «hidden manner». This would be the case of what it is known as GONGOS (from «Governmental NGOs»), these being NGOs or foundations that are created, funded and controlled by governments – or, for instance, profit-based lobbies – that, although presenting themselves and acting as genuine NGOs or CSOs, in fact are mere extensions of the policies of their respective government or lobby.

1.2. The Dialectics of Dialogue vs. Action: Intercultural Dialogue «in Action»

There was a time in which it was argued that the core of intercultural dialogue remained in the «realm of ideas», with a special emphasis in the central responsibility that intellectuals, the university and the academic milieu did face in this field. Afterwards, it was accepted that this was a shared responsibility with the political and social actors, in a debate driven by both the old and new media, being this last an actor with a pivotal role today as the main socialising mechanism of contemporary societies.

Nevertheless, and especially in Europe where this once theoretical debate is being constantly confronted by the growing complexity of everyday life, it is becoming evident the paramount importance that the «domain of the streets» has in order to ensure the viability of this dialogue. Indeed, the interconnection between the theory and the praxis has been identified as the corner stone of any credible approach to intercultural dialogue.

Today, the only way in which intercultural dialogue can become socially useful is when it is conceived as intercultural dialogue «in action»; this is, when it is committed to deliver, and is not just a theoretical exercise, but it is linked to a broader proposal with a specific program of action.

In this context, civil society is central since it is a key player in the interconnection of both domains. In fact, it is thanks to its unique experience in «intercultural action» that civil society can be an exceptional contributor not only to the intellectual dimension of intercultural dialogue, but as a whole.

1.3. Civil Society and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) Key-players & Actors of Intercultural Dialogue

As stated, civil society and CSOs are unique contributors in creating both the spaces and the conditions that predetermine intercultural dialogue, and this is due to a series of reasons.

First of all, and as mentioned before, because they are at the fore-front of intercultural action. In many cases CSOs are the ones that reach those areas of society that the state, the government (even in its different multi-level dimensions) is not able to reach, and in some cases even not willing to reach. This Herculean work that actors of civil society are carrying especially in the fields of social action and integration, migration, mediation, etc., become a some sort of *balsamic solution* that contributes to reasonably reduce and confine what we could call the «multicultural tensions» of our current societies, and helps to convert them into «intercultural challenges»; therefore making more feasible the project of an inclusive society.

Secondly, because they are the guardians, sometimes the watch-dogs, of the human rights paradigm – in the words of Professor Papisca, of this system *ad omnes incluendos* – that also pre-conditions intercultural dialogue.

Thirdly because they are value-based actors. Value-based in their nature and their constituency and, therefore, they are in a unique position to be genuine contributors of social innovation. Values are their *raison d'être* and this gives them a unique capacity of manoeuvre since they are not constrained by the «state interest», the electoral calendar and are not profit-driven. Moreover, civil society is one of the most flexible and adaptable

actors in today's social arena and, again, this adds a plus to their relevance in our field of study.

Finally, CSOs are *sine qua non* actors in some areas that are central to intercultural dialogue, such as youth, non-formal education and learning, the interreligious dimension, etc., and any action in these fields without their active involvement is condemned to fail.

2. Institutional Interaction of CSOs and Civil Society in a Multi-level Framework

2.1. At the Global Level

This central role of civil society in the field of intercultural dialogue has been identified and recognised, in the last years, at many levels. The following is a brief selection of some of the most relevant institutional processes linked to intercultural dialogue, highlighting the recognition they do in each case of the importance of civil society; as well as references to the proposals for interaction with civil society that they include in their plans of action. This selection – which is not comprehensive but representative – is also done in a multi-level perspective, from the global level with the initiatives of the United Nations system to some samples at the local, municipal, level.

At the global scale – institutionally speaking – we find the Alliance of Civilisations³ process. This process was born in the years 2004 and 2005 under the co-sponsorship of Spain and Turkey, and it was a step forward on the basis of the project of «Dialogue among Civilisations» that President Khatami presented in the years 2000 and 2001 with the backing of UNESCO. Indeed, the paradigm of this project was the need to reinforce and enhance the dialogue among civilisations plus, in parallel, moving to concrete common strategic action, this being the meaning of the need of moving from the «dialogue to the alliance». In November 2006 a report that had been commissioned the year before to a High Level Group of Experts was delivered to the Secretary General of United Nations in a ceremony in Istanbul. This was an action-driven report, and its second part was focused in some general and specific recommendations for action in four main fields: youth,

³ www.unaoc.org.

education, migration and media. The report did recognise the conditional role of civil society as an actor and as a potential partner in its implementation, as clearly stated in the whole document, and in particular in its paragraph 5.17:

The central importance of civil society activism: While political steps are necessary in order to advance each of the policy recommendations noted above, political action taken without the support of civil society often falls short of effecting lasting change. The High Level Group therefore calls for a greater role and involvement of civil society in the mechanisms for the advancement of its recommendations [...].

Since then, the implementation of the report and the development of the process has resulted in a series of initiatives, some of them canalised through different civil society organisations, highlighting its Youth Programme including the different projects that are being funded by the Youth Solidarity Fund. Moreover, the annual Alliance of Civilisations Forums (Madrid 2008, Istanbul 2009 and Rio de Janeiro 2010) have become one of the global meeting points for intercultural dialogue and action.

Also in the global context, but in a slightly more specific subject, the United Nations General Assembly has been developing a process since it convened the High Level Debate on Intercultural and Interreligious Cooperation for Peace in 2007. This has been followed up by a series of meetings and resolutions that prompted a proposal, from a coalition of civil society organisations⁴, for the creation by the General Assembly of an International Decade on Intercultural and Interreligious Cooperation for Peace (2011-2020). While still under discussion⁵, the eventual possibility of an international decade under this subject deserves all our attention since it would position the debate at the highest level possible and would provide an important umbrella for civil society activities in this field.

The role and activities of UNESCO, the United Nations agency entrusted to address precisely the issues debated in this article, are also to be taken into close account. Already in 2005, in its Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, UNESCO recognised:

⁴ Initiative for a UN Decade of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, <http://faithdecadeforpeace.net>.

⁵ Resolution A/64/81 of the UN General Assembly on *Promotion of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace* of 7 December 2009.

[...] the fundamental role of civil society in protecting and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions. Parties shall encourage the active participation of civil society in their efforts to achieve the objectives of this Convention⁶.

In its recent World Report on Cultural Diversity (2009), *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*, civil society is also placed as a fundamental actor; and in an «implementation point of view» this is clearly patent in the large programme of activities that the institution has developed for the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2010)⁷.

2.2. At the Regional Level (European and Euro-Mediterranean)

At the European level, we find three main contexts. The first one is linked to the programmes and activities of the Council of Europe. At this level, the Council's White Book on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) has become a point of reference for the theoretical basis and conditions of intercultural dialogue, as well as its main trends and potentialities in terms of implementation and action, including the role of civil society. A special attention deserves the North-South Centre⁸, an institution of the Council based in Lisbon, extremely active in their interaction with youth movements and organisations, as well as in the Mediterranean context. Also centred in youth activities and organisations are the two Youth Centres that the Council maintains in Strasbourg (EYCS)⁹ and Budapest (EYCB)¹⁰, institutions that for years have become «catalysers» of European citizens and icons of this human-rights-based pan-European permanent dialogue that the Council of Europe represents. Moreover, in a purely multi-level governance exercise linked to intercultural dialogue, we find the «Intercultural Cities Programme»¹¹, being another example of the crucial role that local governments are called to play, in collaboration with other levels of governance, and civil society in this field.

The European Union, of course, is one of the nuclear frameworks to take into account. As stated by many, the EU process, history and experience is itself a paradigm of intercultural dialogue and action, with all its shadows, complexities

⁶ Article 11 of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions of 2005.

⁷ www.unesco.org/en/rapprochement-of-cultures.

⁸ www.coe.int/t/dg4/nscentre/default_en.asp.

⁹ www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/EYC/Strasbourg_en.asp.

¹⁰ www.coe.int/t/dg4/eycb/default_EN.asp.

¹¹ www.coe.int/t/dg4/culture/heritage/culture/cities/default_en.asp.

and imperfections, but a reference and a model to be studied and observed closely. In terms of civil society, the EU experience and contribution is unique in fostering transnational CSOs networks (e.g. European Youth Forum¹², but many others in different areas of work) that promote intercultural dialogue and are themselves examples of intercultural action.

To this, and in terms of the recognition of the need to increase civil society involvement in the EU policy on culture, it is of special importance, the European Commission Communication (2007): *European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World*.

But in terms of specific action in order to promote intercultural dialogue, the International Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 (EYID)¹³, that was promoted by the European Union, did represent an incredible container of activities that became a unique patrimony – for the number of activities but also for its diversity and, in certain cases, capacity of innovation – that should be properly studied and should become the basis for an important study of good practices that could be either replicated or even improved.

Indeed, in the same planning process of the EYID, civil society was identified not only as one of its key targets, but also as one of the main stakeholders of the whole process, under the premise of being one of the key *connectors* between the citizen and the institutions. In the words of the European Parliament and of the Council:

Building on the basis of Community experiences and initiatives, a fundamental step is promoting the participation of each citizen, men and women on an equal footing, of each Member State and of European society as a whole in an intercultural dialogue, in particular through the structured cooperation with civil society. It contributes to creating a sense of European identity, by embracing differences and shaping the various aspects of belonging to a community¹⁴.

¹² www.youthforum.org.

¹³ www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu.

¹⁴ Point no. 8 of the Preamble of the *Decisions of the European Parliament and of the Council Concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008)*.

This was the rationale for the establishment in November 2006 of a Civil Society Platform for Intercultural Dialogue by the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), that was one of the driving forces in the planning and implementation of the

whole EYID, and that with the time became the Platform for Intercultural Europe¹⁵. Also in the EYID process – and also as a result of it – the importance of civil society to foster intercultural competences was again underlined, especially in the fields of youth and media¹⁶.

But if there is an institutional context in which the EU is deeply involved and it is *per se* intercultural this is the Euro-Mediterranean one, today within the new organisational framework of the Union for the Mediterranean/Barcelona Process. During its fifteen years of intermittent life, since its conception in the Barcelona Conference of 1995, this complex but at the same time indispensable political process has been an important laboratory for intercultural action and debate, with civil society not only as a key actor but for the first time, in a certain sense, as a key objective.

For more than a decade, an important effort in reinforcing the links between both shores of the Mediterranean was developed. Big part of this effort was done by devoting important quantity of resources (mainly through the MEDA I and MEDA II Programmes) to the cultural dimension of the Barcelona Process, also known as the *third basket* of the Barcelona Process. This *basket* was mainly centred in developing links between societies in the Mediterranean basin and in Europe by encouraging the growth of civil society, as well as promoting cultural awareness and mutual cultural respect throughout Europe and the Mediterranean region. As highlighted before, in the Barcelona Process, civil society is not any more a «key factor» or «actor to take into account» in the process, but an objective in itself; with the understanding that the development of a strong network of capable and genuine civil society organisations through the whole Mediterranean is one of the basis for the success of the whole political process.

While the debate is still open¹⁷ regarding the overall effectiveness of the work developed in this first decade, there is a certain agreement¹⁸ in the positive and constructive impact that some of the experiences, such as the Euro-Med Youth Programme¹⁹, have had in fostering intercultural dialogue in the region.

Since 2005, the Euro-Med action in this *third basket* has been reorganised and centralised via the establishment of the «Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures»²⁰; an

¹⁵ www.intercultural-europe.org.

¹⁶ Points C and D of the *Council Conclusions of 22 May 2007 on Intercultural Competences*.

¹⁷ As an example, see the article of Gerald M. Steinberg in Bekemans et al. (eds) 2007.

¹⁸ See the article of Denis Ilgaz in Bekemans et al. (eds) 2007, specifically pp. 249-250.

¹⁹ Recently re-launched as the Euro-Med Youth Platform: www.euromedp.org.

²⁰ www.euromedalex.org.

institution created to comprehensively canalise the resources that the EU devotes to this area. This foundation, with the headquarters in Alexandria, Egypt, is active in the 43 countries that are part of the Barcelona Process, and has developed a region-wide network of over 3,000 civil society organisations. Moreover, having started this year the Anna Lindh Foundation organises a biannual forum, known as the Anna Lindh Forum²¹, that is to become the Mediterranean «meeting point» for all those actors – especially civil society – that work in the different shades of intercultural dialogue.

2.3. At the Local Level

The nuclear role of the local level, especially the municipal one, as the fore-front of the previously mentioned «inter-cultural dialogue in action» has been already clearly and sufficiently identified²². But, without doubt, in this exercise of mapping the position of civil society in the interaction with the multi-level dimension of institutional action in the field of intercultural dialogue, the local dimension is the most complex to be briefly defined.

On the one side because there is certain confusion between two substantially different levels and actors: the regional and the local ones. Both are intra-state, but they are of a very different constituency and nature. To this regard, it is expected that the *White Paper on Multi-level Governance*, that is being prepared by the Secretariat of the Committee of the Regions²³ of the European Union – the consultation process of which has also highlighted the need to reinforce the analysis of the role that civil society plays within it –, once finished, will be of help to clarify and put some methodological order in this open debate, including the position of civil society in the overall multi-level governance debate.

Secondly, because of the numbers: only in Europe there are more than 300 regions and over 90,000 municipalities, presenting a plurality of realities and a diversity of policy approaches and focus almost *ad infinitum*. To this respect I will briefly point a couple of elements that can be of reference for this necessary debate.

Given precisely by the growing conscience that municipalities and local authorities do have regarding their role to play in the

²¹ www.euromedalex.org/forum 2010.

²² See Léonce Bekemans in Bekemans et al. (eds) 2007.

²³ www.cor.europa.eu.

global scenario, since 2004 they count with an institution, United Cities and Local Governments²⁴ (UCLG), which has become its voice of reference at the global scenario. In this «glocal» dimension, interaction with civil society in relation with intercultural dialogue is mainly done through some of the thematic commissions of UCLG, such as the UCLG's Committee on Culture, the one on City Diplomacy, its Mediterranean Interregional Committee, as well as the Working Group on the Local Dimension of the Alliance of Civilisations. Indeed, UCLG is interacting with the Alliance of Civilisations since the very process of preparation of the High Level Group Report, although concrete actions are exploratory and embryonic still.

On the other side, only in Europe, but also in the United States²⁵, we could identify hundreds of initiatives, at the local level, in which civil society is a structural part of the public policies that address the complex challenges linked to cultural diversity, especially when dealing with the management of public space. One good example is the Barcelona Intercultural Plan²⁶, presented in March 2010 after intensive consultation; another local step into the direction that it was already proposed by UNDP in the year 2000:

It is crucial that civil society organizations and local governments work in partnership to explore the most effective means for delivering services to the citizens of a given community [...]. It is only through strong and capable local authorities, civil society organizations and empowered citizens that globalization as well as localization processes can be managed in a way that would be in the interest of the local population and of benefit to all²⁷.

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²⁴ www.cities-localgovernments.org.

²⁵ See Heckmann, Wolf (eds) 2006.

²⁶ www.interculturalitat.cat.

²⁷ See UNDP 2000.

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