

Intercultural cities – joint action of the Council of Europe and the European Commission

CITY OF OSLO Intercultural Profile

This report is based upon the visit of the inspection team on 27 and 28 August 2008.

Introduction

To the uninformed outsider, Norway and its capital Oslo may not be thought of a place of great cultural diversity. It was isolated from the main flows of internal European migration for many centuries and was not a colonial power. It is still a relatively new nation only recently celebrating its centenary of independence. For many years it was primarily a country of emigration as people left behind poverty for a new life in the US and Canada. Only in the 1970s, with the revival of the economy led by offshore oil production, did the tide turn and Norway became a place of attraction for immigrants.

Early immigration was of an economic nature but as Norwegian society has transformed itself into one of the most prosperous in the world, it has taken an increasing interest in international human rights. It is now one of the most important recipients of asylum seekers and refugees and, for its size, perhaps the largest. The earliest group of immigrants was refugees from Eastern European countries who settled after World War II. The next influx was of migrant workers from Pakistan, Turkey and India in the 1960s and 70s. Norway has not accepted migrant workers since 1976. Today most of the immigrants come as refugees and asylum seekers, or to be reunited with their families. The most rapidly growing ethnic groups in Oslo are people from Sri Lanka, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Vietnam, North Africa, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Having undergone a process of nation-building in the last century, there is still a powerful strand of thinking that true 'Norwegianness' lies in the blood and with a strong historical, cultural linguistic grounding. As such, whilst many Norwegians have been pleased to welcome needy foreigners to take refuge in their land, they find it difficult to imagine that such people could ever become truly Norwegian. The title of recent publication from the Norwegian Board of Immigrant Organisations "Young, Norwegian and Black" triggered a widespread debate. There is also a growing number of people who wish to severely limit further immigration and vote accordingly. The Progress party now shares the running of the city council in alliance with the Conservative party.

The main policy responsibilities for immigrants in Norway are shared between central government and the municipalities. Integration, for example through training, education, health and social work and housing is largely a municipal responsibility. The work is financed through per capita grants from central government.

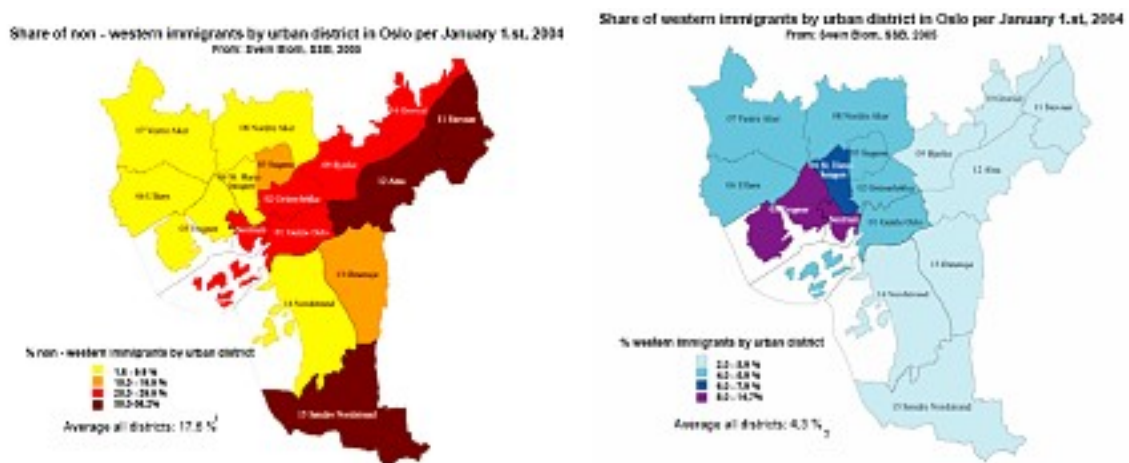
The location of immigrants in the country since the halt in market led immigration in 1976 has been strongly regulated through government policy at national and local level. Central policies have sought to achieve a more geographically balanced distribution of immigrants. This has been seen as a means of avoiding the development of excessive concentrations in some popular areas with the possible effects of ghetto development and associated potential problems. An important element in the strategy has been the decentralized location of reception centres for refugees and the arrangement whereby each local authority decides on a quota of refugees that they will receive, normally during the period of one year. These mechanisms contribute to a wide geographic distribution of immigrants. As these settle and get more integrated, they can move freely within the country and many choose to move towards the more urbanized regions, especially in and around Oslo.

Housing and neighbourhoods

“The total population in Oslo is 560,484 (2008) and it is growing rapidly. About 25% of these, 139 860, are immigrants, with a majority (ca 80%) of non-western origin.

(Source: www.ssb.no/english/subjects/00/00/10/innvandring_en/)

Unlike most other cities in Norway, Oslo is a culturally diverse city in the sense that people from many different countries and with different ethnic backgrounds live there, often in long-standing communities. However, Oslo presents a stark picture in terms of the spatial distribution of migrant communities as the maps below demonstrate.



Most of Oslo’s housing park is privately owned. The city’s liberal market approach to housing has prevented the heavy concentration of migrants in specific areas which often happens in cities with highly concentrated social

housing. The city's small social housing park is relatively dispersed and will become more so when measures to further distribute social housing across the city, take effect.

At present the location of social housing along with unregulated discrimination against migrants in the private sector has led to a concentration of non-western migrants in the east of the city. Whilst migrants originally concentrated in the inner city districts of Gamle Oslo and Grünerløkka, there has been a strong process of gentrification which has seen many minority groups move out to the south east and the north east suburbs, such as Groruddalen.

OXLO

Oslo City Council, under its high-profile City Chief Commissioner Erling Lae, has taken a positive stance towards cultural diversity. This has taken its most tangible form in the OXLO – Oslo Extra Large campaign¹. Following a racist murder in 2001, OXLO was set up as a long-term awareness-raising campaign to make the city more tolerant. It is part of the city's Plan of Action Against Nazism, Racism and Intolerance and also the Action Plan for Equal Treatment in Municipal Employment. It focuses mainly on young people and public services. All public agencies have fifteen duties in regard to recruitment and must interview at least one qualified ethnic minority member for all posts. They must also have policies and strategies, for example in dealing with ethnic conflict. OXLO has appointed young people as ambassadors to act as role models, an annual award is made for special achievement in anti-racist work and there is an 'OXLO Week' each year. The Council manages OXLO in partnership with the *Rådet for innvandrersorganisasjoner* (Board of Immigrant Organisations) which represents more than 300 bodies.

The City also provides a welcoming service for new arrivals (Velkommenoslo)², including a mentoring scheme whereby Oslo residents introduce newcomers to the city. It would be important that the city considers ways of "telling the intercultural story of Oslo" to newcomers to help them feel they really belong to the city and show the city's human face. For instance, small videos with real life stories of successful migrant on the web site Welkommenoslo would make a difference.

The City Council has set itself targets in key areas such as housing, and employment where it knows that discrimination against people with foreign names or accents is still widespread. For example in 2008 it will find housing for 240 new asylum seekers. It has established a job introduction scheme including language training, mentorship and workplace training. Its goal is that 60% of trainees should gain employment although it is currently achieving only 40%.

¹ <http://www.bydel-alna.oslo.kommune.no/narmiljoet/oxlo/>

² <http://www.velkommenoslo.no/english/>

The key to success of the new scheme is expected to be the personalised approach based on the job seeker's qualifications, skills, needs and wishes and a co-ordinated action by various agencies.

Education

In education it noticed several years ago an alarming disjuncture between migrant and native children with many more of the former leaving school without any qualifications. There has since been heavy investment in education to even out the inequalities and as a consequence Oslo is the best-performing education authority in the country. This has included greater use of testing, close attention to under-performing groups and extra teacher training as well as high investment in kindergartens.

Kindergartens tend to be characterised by great ethnic mixing but there are signs that primary and secondary schools are gradually becoming more ethnically-polarised as more affluent parents opt out of some schools and into other. This is being countered by limiting the right to choice and also by heavily investing in those schools that are threatened by 'white flight'. For example, the Gamlebyen Skole is a classic inner city primary school with a wide range of languages and a combination of complex social and cultural issues. The school's physical environment is shaped to involve references of migrant children's culture of origin such as the climbing wall made up of letters of all world alphabets, the original carved wood pillar of a destroyed Mosque in Pakistan, kilims and other objects which create a warm, homely atmosphere. The curriculum in the school (which is a primary school) involves cultural and intercultural learning. There is a benchmarking tool allowing teachers to check whether they stand in diversity matters such as engaging parents from different origins. The school has edited a book from a joint project from Ankara and is now running a film project with schools from Denmark and Turkey.

The knowledge centers being developed in 4 schools under the urban development plan for the districts of Groruddalen are open from 8 until 8, with highly skilled and motivated staff and a high level of parental involvement and family learning encouraged.

Oslo has also pioneered efficient methods in adult language education such as project-based learning, inviting students to set up their own company. Students make contact with the local community, learn to make telephone conversations, talk to managers in other companies, apply for jobs...all in real. One of the companies which emerged was a puppet-based story telling of Persian fairy tales.

The University of Oslo also has its own diversity programmes. One of them involves elective subjects about diversity in Norway and about higher education in 5 secondary schools, with master students acting as mentors. This has lead over the 4 years to 30% increase of university admissions from these schools, while the Oslo school average was 7% increase.

A mentoring for mature students from minority backgrounds helps to lower dropout. Now there are about 11 % minority students and the target is 15% in the next two years. Similar projects in other universities also worked well. Encouragingly, the university has turned the project into a permanent diversity office.

Civil Society

There is a large and very active voluntary sector concerned with diversity in Oslo and it plays a vital role in many things from combating racism and discrimination to the delivery of mainstream public services. One of the most interesting from an intercultural perspective is OMOD - Organisasjon mot offentlig diskriminering (Organization against Institutional Discrimination). They provide information, advice, and assistance to organisations in the area of race relations, serving as an ombudsman against institutional discrimination and alleged breaches of civil and human rights in Norway. They also scrutinize the central and local government's rules and policies and their implementation in relationship to minorities and immigrants. Whilst this in itself is an important but rather commonplace set of functions, the way OMOD perceives itself is as an opportunity to appraise public service 'through an intercultural lens'. They pose a challenge to Norwegian society by arguing that integration is not simply an issue for migrants but for all. They take this challenge to key institution such as the police, and make a comprehensive reappraisal of how services should be designed and delivered and how the mindsets of established professionals can be changed. For example, this has involved taken senior managers and policy-makers to meet multi-racial police services in New York and London and debating the outcomes. They have tried to move their activities beyond the level of identifying and combating racism to tackling more unconscious and routine forms of discrimination. They try to do this through encouragement and the dissemination of best practice.

Youth work and the arts are given a high priority in the city strategy. This is partly because of a need to move beyond the stereotype of young migrants as vulnerable or unstable new arrivals to them being seen as normal members of society; and also because the arts and media remain one of the most segregated areas of Norwegian life. The X-Ray Youth Culture House and the Nordic Black Theatre are good examples of new intercultural spaces where a new hybridised Oslo youth culture is being forged. Youngsters who started with these projects are now starting to make their mark on mainstream Norwegian society through achieving positions in the mainstream media and arts worlds, and they in turn act as role models for future generations.

There are some very strong mono-ethnic organisations in the city. The Tamil community is presented as the paragon in this regard. It is a highly organised community of about 12,000 in Norway with two thirds based in Oslo, with a high level of mutual communication and support. It has purchased large premises from which it operated a comprehensive array of social, cultural and educational functions. Its managing group takes a

high profile role in community relations, intervening quickly and decisively in cases of potential problems and maintaining close links with local politicians. Whilst this is highly appreciated by public agencies it is sometimes resented as social control by younger members of the community. The group concedes that whilst it cultivates close relations with ethnic Norwegians it is less closely integrated with other minority groups.

There were critical suggestions in some quarters that the Council operates a 'divide and rule' policy by encouraging monocultural groups to integrate vertically into a form of client status but not to integrate horizontally. We could suggest that the city considers providing shared space for organisations' offices (A House of associations) to encourage ethnic and mainstream NGOs to interact and cooperate more extensively.

Business

One aspect of Norwegian society that has remained stubbornly white and conservative is business. Whilst employment opportunities through anti-discrimination have been growing for migrants, there are very few in positions of seniority. Migrants in Oslo are far more entrepreneurial than Norwegian counterparts, but often these small businesses are locked into ethnic economies and are invisible to mainstream society. One or two Norwegian companies (such as the software designer Opera) have gone out of their way to recruit a diverse workforce and to make a public virtue but they are the exceptions to the norm.

The City council's Office for Business Development has taken an active stance on integrating minority businesses. The greatest problem they have is with the complexity of Norwegian rules and regulations regarding taxation and business practice. Many small business contravene the law without understanding or even knowing it, and many others opt to enter the black economy to make life simpler. The council is worried that this will lead to widespread criminalisation of the minority business community and feels urgent action is needed. Having visited minority business services in London, they were shocked at how little Oslo spends in comparison.

A Nordic Network for Diversity at Work has been established and Oslo hosted a conference on the European Intercultural Workplace recently, attended by 70 CEOs, but it is felt there is much still work to be done in bringing diversity into the Norwegian business world.

Media

Norway is one of the most media-saturated countries in the world with a large number of newspapers, radio and TV channels with very large reader/listenerships. It is not surprising therefore that there have been good opportunities for ethnic minorities to establish a foothold. In the

mainstream there is Migrapolis³ a weekly magazine programme about minorities interacting with the majority, appearing on prime time TV since 1997. It has taken the lead in teaching Norwegians about how their society is changing. It was founded by 6 minority journalists

Conclusions

Oslo is the capital city of a country which has a commendable record in international human rights, peace-making and cultural relations, and which has taken the lead in the accommodation of refugees but which is, nevertheless still struggling to come terms with the long term implications of migration and cultural diversity. Norway certainly understands the value and meaning of interculturalism at the global level and has devoted its very considerable foreign aid budget to making it happen around the world, but does Norway understand diversity when presented to it in its own backyard? Being intercultural locally is a rather different business than being intercultural globally and many are unsure whether it is or even should be possible.

But whilst the country debates what is the true meaning of "Norwegianness", the city of Oslo really does not have the luxury of such niceties. It has to get on with the reality of running a city in which, before too long, over half the children will be from an ethnic minority background. To this extent Oslo is become a unique 'state within a state' where intercultural hybridity is emerging side by side with the emergence of growing polarisation. The Oslo approach is level-headed and pragmatic backed by a strong political commitment and guaranteed by a strong network of relationships between local government and civil society, and most importantly is seen to be having effects. However, Oslo faces a challenge looming on the horizon. It is still influenced heavily by law made at the national level, often by legislators with little understanding or sympathy of its special circumstances. This may come into even sharper focus if following the next national elections a more populist and exclusionary approach makes its ways into national policies.

One area where government policy does hold the city back is in the reluctance to gather data according to ethnicity. This makes it hard to identify aspects of inequality or the efficaciousness of actions and undermines the development of evidence-based policy.

One area of concern is claims that Oslo is developing a British-style multiculturalist problem in which certain groups are creating inward-looking enclaves within the city. This is contrasted with the picture in other parts of Norway where by virtue of their smaller numbers, migrants are finding it easier and/or more beneficial to interact, for example the story of an isolated town in Telemark where Somalis have become such a popular part of the local community that the mayor is calling for more to settle⁴.

³ <http://www.nrk.no/kanal/nrk2/migrapolis/1149647.html>

⁴ <http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article2624933.ece?service=print>

There is a sense that in Oslo migration and cultural diversity are still seen primarily as issues of social welfare. There is much well-conceived and executed work taking place and an admirable commitment to avoiding the emergence of either an American or French-style underclass. However there are other areas of policy where there has been little or no new policy thinking. If Oslo wants to emerge as an internationally competitive and cosmopolitan city it perhaps needs to look at some of its other activities through an intercultural lens. For example how the complexion of its business leadership can change and how the city and nation can start to rebrand itself; or how the design and use of public space better reflect the city's diversity. Oslo should also take care that the current trend of gentrification in the inner eastern quarter of the city does not drive the distinctive minority populations and businesses entirely out to the suburbs, replacing it with the bland corporate brands of 'anytown'. Oslo's post-war architecture can make it a rather austere prospect to the visitor and the (albeit limited) ethnicizing of this has been a welcome antidote.

Another concern is that in spite of the welter of welfare activity, an underclass is emerging in the city and very visibly. In the area adjacent to the central railway station, the sale of drugs and sexual services by people of migrant origin is amongst the most blatant and intrusive of any in Western Europe. Yet there seems little appetite or even legislative framework to deal with it.

However, there is much for other cities to learn from Oslo, both in the professionalism of its public services, the political commitment of its leadership and the drive and creativity of its youth and civil society organisations.

Strengths	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the co-ordination of intercultural work is placed directly directly under the Commissioner for Education and Cultural Affairs who has a budget for supporting intercultural events, facilitating the Red Cross centres, and youth work centres, outreach work with police... - a "personalised" job qualifications service based on people's skills, wishes and needs - Successful school and university schemes/programmes encouraging students of minority origin to pursue higher education; - A monthly meeting of the diversity caucus where NGOs and city institutions present good practice and co-ordinate action; - strong action to encourage minority recruitment by the city agencies; based on 15 specific rules. - good co-operation between the city agencies, incl. the police with OMOD, a minority rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the new intercultural park planned for the Grorud Valley neighbourhood could become a new Oslo landmark after the Opera, with a strong emphasis on diversity - The OMOD publication "Young, black and Norwegian" raised a debate about Norwegian identity. It would be interesting to pursue such a debate longer-term on a broader and more intensive scale, possibly with media. - Nordic Black Theatre, Almedie and X-Ray are innovative, participative and "tuned" initiatives whose example public authorities should disseminate and encourage other to follow, including through conditional financing

<p>organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the new system of school enrolment based both on area and grades, has increased ethnic mixing in schools - a couple of truly intercultural schools which could drive the others to change if the means and energy are put in place. One could imagine an intercultural city award to boost interest - a continuous dialogue between religious leaders and between them and institutions, to prevent crises; - successful encouragement of cross-ethnic NGO work by making it a main criterion for local grants to be further strengthened when the criteria are renewed. - Mentoring programme for newcomers to the city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The effective adult language education school with project-based learning could become even better if it also “reversed the tables” and let students show or teach their native languages on some occasions.
<p>Weaknesses</p>	<p>Threats</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - there is not sufficient data about socio-cultural and educational achievements and needs of different ethnic groups, or about the public opinion towards migrants. - The authorities could communicate more clearly to citizens about the actual demography of migration and their own integration policies - The intercultural programmes are strongly biased towards children and young people, which risks leaving the older native population (a key part of voters) behind - Need to spread the (small) municipal social housing park more evenly around the city - Improve involvement of migrants in local life and institutions (e.g the boards of housing co-operatives and rehabilitation projects). - Relatively slow decision-making and administrative procedures which may prevent good ideas from being implemented; need for a greater reactivity and flexibility of the decision-making processes; - there is a need for a greater emphasis and more resources for ethnic enterprise and also vocational skills, there is an over bias towards academic achievement. - Business umbrella organisations to be involved in urban regeneration or other projects more regularly - It is a challenge to combat recruitment discrimination towards foreigners, but also make programmes to integrate the families of foreign workers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the traditional and persistent East-West divide, with the East both poorer and “blacker” damages the image of an inclusive city and could foster unrest - the somewhat complex and slow decision-making system in the city could cut short some of the grassroots initiatives and projects developed within the city administration

