

*Moderator and panellist. Interaction in Diversity for Social Cohesion: frameworks and references to adapt the organization and competences of social services to the demands of a pluralist society. Organised by the Directorate General III – Social Cohesion of the Council of Europe, in partnership with the European Commission and the Government of Quebec, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 7-8 December.*

To begin, let me just say that I am not the real Khurshid Ahmed, apologies again for those who were expecting him [he has broken his foot and has sent me to replace him]. My name is, indeed, Dr Tahir Abbas.

Yesterday, I moderated the session, '**accommodating diversity and developing our services to respond to diversity without arousing resistance**'.

There were five presentations from the panellists, and all the speakers were able to present their points succinctly so as to permit a round of detailed questions and answers towards the end. Before I summarise the key points to emerge, let me take a few moments to elaborate upon a range of important pre-determining factors and issues, if I may.

Diversity is a given but equality is not. Multiculturalism, assimilation, acculturation, interculturalism and mono-culturalism all re-enforce a dominant culture or set of cultures<sup>1</sup>, but the real issues affecting immigrants and minorities tend to be issues of powerlessness, disadvantage and isolation. There is also the important issue of discrimination and racism – that is, the negative prejudicial attitudes towards 'the other' that can lead to persistent hostile outcomes.

It goes without saying that the twentieth century was the bloodiest in our known history, although it is true that at end the first decade of the new millennia, many conflicts, tensions and inequities remain, and arguably they increase in the context of globalisation (which, we need to bear in mind, is of the few, not the many).

It is because of the forces of the internationalisation of capital, culture, and identities that we in modern post-industrial economies struggle with a number of demographic, social and cultural challenges, many of which relate to the issue of how we adopt 'others' while we adapt 'ourselves'. Some of these nations have a stronger sense of the 'self', while others feel threatened by new groups and actively resist their positive integration.

The latter is important to consider as there is a general tendency to focus on the minority to work to ensure their own adoption of adaptation to society; that they need to learn the language, assimilate the culture, become one with a sense of an indivisible unitary whole regarded as the nation, *but little attention is paid to the role of the state or the formation and development of the nation itself*. There is an important need to focus on the workings of society, the nature of social interaction in institutions, organisations, schools, hospitals, neighbourhoods and how they are planned and administered by city authorities.

These issues have been made time and time again in the many varied and excellent presentations we have been listening to over the last two days. A range of solutions have been put forward, and they tend focus on training, **inter-cultural dialogue, exchange but also action, and** a general positive set of attitudes towards the minority through a state-enforced model of multiculturalism, if we call it that, which very much goes on in Britain, for example, and to some degree of success.

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<sup>1</sup> see Parekh, Bhikhu (2005) *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.

There are also many positive examples of community-embedded practices, where simply through will and a **constructive energy**, events in schools, synagogues, town halls, and so on, actively bring people together, young and old, minority and majority, the powerful and the powerless. However, the mechanisms connecting the top and bottom of societies are not quite working. There are tremendous gaps in institutional bridge-building, as well as the professionalisation of services to meet the challenges of difference.

Let me say something about the key messages to emerge from the five papers on the panel:

1. Professor Cohen-Emerique [from France] talked about the need to ensure adequate training and development of social work professionals operating in the field with new immigrant and existing minority groups. This helps to avoid the potential for a 'cultural clash', and it encourages respect and tolerance on all sides, particularly in relation to sensitive concerns impacting on matters of education, family, and marriage, for example. There is a need to diversify methods, in particular to encourage groups to form associations for support and engagement. All of these methods will improve trust, build consensus and formalise standards. This process, moreover, needs to be managed. Social workers are not just people, they reflect the structural dynamics of the institutions and organisations that employ them and, therefore, this is important to remember.
2. Mr Habib Rahman [from London, UK] provided an overview of the situation of immigrants and minorities in the UK. In 2004, approximately 11% of a population of 61m people are ethnic minorities. Although Britain has a proud tradition of equality and anti-discrimination legislation, helping to manage diversity, and protect against racism, there still remains the notion of an 'unsettled Britain'<sup>2</sup>, particularly with reference to new groups, and where in wider media and political discourses, migrants are demonised and used as scapegoats for significant problems elsewhere. Ethnic minorities are represented in the National Health Service and in higher education often in greater proportions than their population profiles would suggest, but there still remain gaps at the top end of certain professions, where greater representation in the senior grades is still to be found.
3. Professor Freisenhahn ('Freeze-an-han') [from Germany] provided a theoretical framework for accommodating diversity, where a top-down led programme of policy and action provides the basis for positive inter-cultural and inter-ethnic social cohesion. However, it is difficult to determine a single formula as every situation has its own unique idiosyncratic characteristics and challenges, but training and development, again mentioned here, is essential for 'front-line' workers to have the capacity and professionalisation to act in accordance with the diktats of law but also the specific needs of user groups.
4. Professor Antonova [from Russia] provided an interesting comparative case study on the organisational and employment profiles of the civil service systems in Britain and Russia. In Britain, greater acknowledgement of diversity is generally found, reflecting law but also the belief in the importance of valuing diversity to reflect a diverse society. In fact, most women and minorities are concentrated in the lower grades, but, crucially, there is a recognition of the need to improve representation at the higher levels, with performance-related targets now set for permanent secretaries and director generals to implement. In the Russian case, the civil service is not diverse at all – rather it is self-selecting, closed in relation to recruitment practices, and seems not at all to be concerned with the need to

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<sup>2</sup> see The Parekh Report (2000) *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, London: Profile.

reflect the wider diversity of Russian society. This is, therefore, of potential risk to the implementation of determining and delivering policies to bring about social cohesion.

5. Professor Saillant ('Say-aunt') [from Quebec] reflected, *again*, on the importance of social work training and professorial development, but felt that the service can never be totally inter-cultural because of the difficulty that exists in managing these challenges in reality. It is, therefore, important to think of differences based on the wider societal context, where pluralism and ethnic identities are constantly in a state of flux. To a greater extent, it is important to **rise above ethnicity**, and look at groups in society based precisely on their needs. An important point was made on power relations and how it is important to be aware that it is easy to generalise in relation to various inter-cultural models, but this would be too simplistic. Minorities need to be empowered in relation to their rights and obligations, but also remain cognisant of the legal framework in which they and their service providers operate.

There are interesting and important linkages between each of the presentations. That is, there is a need to ensure that service delivery and performance are managed adequately and held to account as appropriate, **but** to also remain aware of the fact that we are dealing with people, not units of analysis or discrete theoretical or conceptual categories.

These public services need to deliver services effectively and without stigmatising the very people it is meant to affect the lives of. As 'public servants', health workers, social workers, teachers and other such service providers, there is a need to remain aware of the need to deliver the 'public good'.

**To avoid the potential for resistance, we need to empower and build the capacities of user groups.** One of the key issues affecting minority groups in relation to service take-up is clearly a function of the lack of power. This impacts on notions of cultural and social capital – which affects the ability of groups to interact with service providers, and these relate to all types of public services, including health, education, housing and employment, to name often what are the largest and have the most impact on the lives of people.

For me, having had the fortunate opportunity to moderate such an important international panel, *these are just some* of the significant issues to think about as we all go forward.

I hope these thoughts were of some interest, and I thank you for your time.