

# **Living in Diversity**

Report on Module 4 of the Euro-Mediterranean Intercultural Trends Course

by the Anna Lindh Foundation

Written by Angela Warkentin, Josephin Witt and Zhao Yueqi

## **1 Introduction**

The report focuses on the topics about how we can live in diversity, in which there are four main parts to discuss the relevant questions and findings.

The first part is the link between the level of religiosity and the openness to intercultural relations. Then it discusses how much we mind having a person from a different cultural background. Following that, some complex contemporary issues are analyzed. Finally, it focuses on how to live together in multicultural environments.

## **2 Religiosity and the openness to intercultural relations**

This part briefly analyzes the link between a person's level of religiosity and their openness to intercultural relations. When asked about their degree of religiosity, 5% and 34% of southern and eastern Mediterraneans categorized themselves as non-religious and very religious, respectively; while 30% and 23% of Europeans declared themselves not religious and very religious.

The most widely-supported intervention by Europeans across these groups is in education, with 80% for not-religious; 82% for somewhat religious; and 81% for very religious. The varied difference of religious and secular beliefs in different SEM countries to public life appears to be reflected in how respondents viewed the effectiveness of different interventions to foster a multicultural environment.

Among the findings, for example, in Algeria, there was no difference between non-religious and very religious respondents (both 73%) who stated they did not mind 'at all' their children attending school with someone of a different background. While in Israel, non-religious respondents (45%) were far more tolerant of their children attending a mixed school than very religious respondents (14%).

## **3 Researching the Openness to People from a different cultural Background**

As part of the assessment of the level of tolerance towards people with a different cultural background, the attitude of the study participants towards foreign neighbors, work colleagues and schoolmates, as well as towards relationships with people from the other shore, is being researched. The question to be answered is how much or how little the participants are bothered by cultural diversity.

The results of the study reveal that 82% of the European and 75% of the SEM participants believe that they would not be bothered at all by having a person with a different cultural background as a work colleague. 78% of European and 74% of SEM participants confirm that they would not mind having a neighbor with a different cultural background. And finally, when it comes to marrying people from a different cultural background or close relatives marrying people from abroad, the percentages are quite similar at 65% and 60%.

In this context, Ricard Zapata-Barrero shows the correlation between the degree of appreciation of diversity and the type of intercultural interaction people have already experienced in their lives. Among European respondents, it appears that interactions taking place via online chats and within schools are not only more likely to generate a positive change in opinion about the other person, with online chats rated at 37% and interactions in school at 32%, but also much more likely to generate a positive view of diversity as a source of prosperity for society as a whole, with 74% and 78.5% respectively. Among SEM respondents, very similar levels of positive change in perceptions about Europeans can be registered if the interaction took place at school with 57%, in the neighborhood with also 57% or in public spaces with 60%.

Femke De Keulenaer further finds that respondents with higher levels of tolerance are more likely to believe in the effectiveness of culturally diverse schools in improving how people live together.

#### **4 Discussion about complex contemporary issues**

One of the hardest challenges for inter-cultural diversity, acceptance and tolerance is radicalisation against different cultures or beliefs. To tackle the challenge of radicalisation, a number of approaches and tools based on dialogue, exchange, education and training programmes have been developed in the past. In the study respondents were presented with seven dialogue measures to prevent and deal with conflict and radicalisation and for each measure, respondents were asked whether they thought it would be an efficient measure or not. The following seven measures were included in the Survey: (1) Education and youth programmes to foster youth-led dialogue initiatives; (2) Support of youth participation in public life; (3) Exchange programmes involving people across the Mediterranean; (4) Cultural and artistic initiatives; (5) Interreligious dialogue; (6) Trainings in diversity management and radicalisation prevention; and (7) Media training for cross-cultural reporting.

Education and youth programmes that foster youth-led dialogue initiatives were seen as “efficient” in near-equal percentages, at 81% and 85%, respectively, in Europeans and southern and eastern Mediterraneans.

The survey also shows that SEM countries appear to show a higher level of belief in the value and use of the different measures listed in the Survey. One reason for this could be that the SEM countries have a greater level of exposure to radicalisation than in the European

countries included in this Survey. In SEM countries, there is a clear desire for supporting youth in public life and for developing specific education and youth programmes to foster youth-led dialogue initiatives. These two measures receive the highest 'very efficient' ratings in SEM countries (64% and 63% respectively), which are characterised by a high percentage of young people in the population and where youth radicalisation is of a greater concern than in European countries. Some of the results may also be an indicator of specific needs in each region, such as differences in the need for independent/objective media reporting. In European countries, media training for cross-cultural reporting is ranked lowest of all the measures included in the Survey while in SEM countries, 54% of respondents answered that this would be a very efficient measure. This is probably because people in the SEM countries feel that their media is more controlled than in the other European countries.

In Addition the survey also investigated if the respondents' answers correlated with their age group. The results of the study show that there is not much difference between the age groups in both European and SEM countries across all dialogue measures. For both measures, the older the respondents were in Europe, the more likely they were to think that these measures would be 'very efficient', while this level of belief in the value and use of the measures was more evenly distributed across age groups in SEM countries. When it comes to individuals' level of tolerance towards people from a different cultural background, respondents in SEM countries with a high level of tolerance have a much stronger belief in the efficiency of the different dialogue measures than respondents in European countries with a similar level of tolerance.

Experts explain possible reasons that might lead to the transformation of passive polarisation into active radicalisation with globalisation and exposure to new overburdening information. The exposure can also quickly become a source of anxiety and be viewed as an hazard on one's distinct way of life, as cultures become increasingly blended across borders. Cultural adaptation can be seen as a threat to existing values and norms and trigger a conservative counter-revolution to protect local customs and values.

The reasons behind someone becoming radicalized and adopting violent extremism are complex and vary from one individual to another and Globalization, frustration, poverty or feelings of being excluded do not in themselves explain radicalization. But often radicalization is a combination of individual traits, as well as feelings of isolation and frustration. Fighting the misperceptions and tendency to label entire groups based on individual actions requires not only better critical thinking, but also meaningful dialogue and understanding of each other through interaction.

## **5 Living together in a multicultural Environment**

When it comes to exploring ways of living together in a multicultural environment, the main focus is on the openness of the participants and the perception of cultural and religious diversity within their societies. What is very clear is that a high majority of people from Europe and southern and eastern Mediterranean agree that people from different cultural and religious backgrounds should all have equal opportunities and rights. The percentages are at 91% for the European participants and 80% for the SEM participants.

Regarding the perception of cultural and religious diversity as a danger to societal stability, Femke De Keulenaer gave a closer look at some countries, namely Portugal, Croatia, Finland and the Netherlands. She found that in all these countries, only 5% or less of respondents agreed with the idea of diversity as a threat. While 71% of Finns strongly disagreed, in the other three countries 45-53% agreed.

Aliki Moschis-Gauguet, who is a member of the Advisory Council of the Anna Lindh Foundation, presents a model for intercultural cities, that in her own words are traditionally ideal laboratories for cross-cultural fertilization. She recommends the use of art and creativity in public spaces with the aim of engaging citizens in intercultural communication. Aliki Moschis-Gauguet further underlines the importance of exchange programs and addresses the need to expand transnational cooperation through school partnerships or joint intercultural education projects.

In his article on Italian hospitality in the face of increasing migration flows Khalid Chaouki describes the Mediterranean tradition of welcoming others as a golden rule. This tradition has been rediscovered since 2013, mainly as a result of the waves of migration. With almost 70%, the most important value that Italian parents want to teach their children is respect for people from other cultures. Interestingly, this value has even increased since 2012. It can be summarized that Italian respondents are more receptive to accept diversity and also to recognize the potential benefits of Euro-Mediterranean collaborations.

## **6 Conclusion**

There is no doubt that people and cultures are different. The coexistence of different cultures, irrespective of the reasons, often leads to friction and conflict. However, experience also shows that diversity is an opportunity for societies and that people are willing to stand up for peaceful coexistence.

Religion is often the most obvious difference between people from different cultural backgrounds. In general, respondents from SEM countries were more likely to classify themselves as religious than respondents from European countries. However, acceptance of those who think differently and believe differently seems to be increasingly developing in a positive direction among both Europeans and SEM respondents. Most respondents do not mind having colleagues or neighbors from a different cultural background, nor do they mind close relatives marrying people from a different origin.

High levels of tolerance lead to more positive attitudes toward cultural diversity. This tolerance can be learned through active encounters in everyday life, at school or through projects that promote integration. Education is the most widely-supported intervention by Europeans as well as SEM respondents. Cultural adaptation is thus seen less and less as a threat to existing values and norms. The main barriers to cross-cultural encounters are cultural, linguistic, and related to stereotypes. Therefore, it is important to provide opportunities for language learning and to educate about stereotypes.

Experts and respondents from the SEM regions and from Europe agree on one point: focusing on youth and especially on education is the best way to combat radicalization and create peaceful and respectful coexistence in a multicultural environment. There is generally an atmosphere of optimism in this context. For example, despite, or perhaps because of, current humanitarian crises, Mediterranean hospitality is being rediscovered and cultural diversity is seen as an opportunity for society.