



WORLD FORUM ON INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE
Baku, 7-9 April 2011

***“Mainstreaming intercultural dialogue
in the sustainable development and peace agenda”***
8 April 2011, 14h10 – 16h00

CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE

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The session wishes to respond to the increasing need at all levels for new approaches to foster mutual understanding and cooperation for sustainable development and lasting peace in a rapidly global changing landscape, characterized by the world’s intense interdependence and fragility. In this regard, the value and the respect of cultural diversity as well as the practice of intercultural dialogue in national and international strategies have been largely overlooked. In the era of an ever more rapid pace of social transformation worldwide, the costs of this omission are incredibly high. Nevertheless, the UN Resolution on Culture and Development (December 2010) emphasizes the important contribution of culture for sustainable development and for the achievement of national and international development objectives, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This represents a major breakthrough at the international level in so far as there is no explicit mention of culture in the MDGs. Indeed, globalization brings with it not only hitherto unknown potential for expression and innovation, but also the risk of fragmentation, marginalisation and standardization of cultures, as well as conflict - often attributed to cultural differences - leading to the breakdown of the social bonds. Therefore, there is a growing need of fresh thinking and strong political will to address these new challenges for which no one is prepared to respond in a comprehensive manner.

Cultural diversity is obviously, by definition, an enduring and central feature of the United Nations system in general and, more particularly of UNESCO, which is entrusted with the mandate to ensure the preservation and “promotion of the fruitful diversity of cultures”. The way in which cultural diversity has been conceived at a theoretical level and then implemented at practical levels has varied substantially over the last six decades. This request has become all the more crucial in the era of globalization, as development models produced since the 1970s have clearly failed, despite constant revision, to live up to the expectations they raised. The new challenges arising from globalization are making it increasingly important to redefine the relationship between culture and development or, rather, between diversity, dialogue and development: the “Three Ds”.

Development must be based on the diversity of cultures, which is the basic code of human life's understanding, an open, progressive repository of wisdom, experience, knowledge, exchange, solidarity and ways of living together by widening the range of options open to everyone. In this way, culture is the key to decode the past and the present as well as to shape the future one of the sources of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence (Article 3 of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001). Furthermore, the Earth Summit (Johannesburg, 2002) considered diversity as collective force of development.

On the other hand, intercultural dialogue encourages readiness to question well-established value-based certainties by bringing reason, emotion and creativity into play in order to find new, shared understandings. By doing so it goes far beyond mere negotiation, where mainly political, economic and geo-political interests are at stake. It is a permanent process that demands not only the recognition of cultural diversity exploring all forms of creativity, innovation and permanent regeneration but also the shared universal values that underlie it. Therefore, there is an even deeper need to seek, identify and nurture those forms of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue that are especially likely to strengthen rather than weaken one another. In brief, these two notions are intimately linked: neither of these can flourish without the other. In this regard, it is urgent to "identify and encourage those forms of cultural diversity that promote internal reflexivity, the capacity to be convivial and the creative impetus for changing existing cultural horizons in response to change. Without these properties, intercultural dialogue will either be unproductive or hypocritical".

In the current political landscape, Member States, international organizations and non governmental organizations, academia and other stakeholders have to welcome the virtuous cycle of cultural diversity and its corollary, intercultural dialogue for development and peace which implies respect for democracy and human rights. Several initiatives from governmental and intergovernmental organizations, but also from the private sector and cultural institutions are currently developing research projects and policy initiatives to build evidence of the correlation between intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity with peace and development.

Nevertheless, the degree of political involvement is not easy to evaluate: for many governmental institutions, this assumption was either too evident or too abstract to be taken into account in a real policy. The following conditions have to be fulfilled in order to renew our discourse, methods and action:

i) clarify current understanding of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, beyond rethorics, based not only on top-down processes (politicians, academics, policy-makers and policy influencers) that are supposed to have a "trickle down" effect into wider society, but also on awareness-raising among ordinary peoples; explore and popularize the existing and countless other links between cultural diversity, dialogue and development by revisiting traditional methodologies or inventing innovative ones, taking into account the impact of cultural resources in development processes.

(ii) Improve the conditions for genuine intercultural dialogue on diverse peace and development-related themes. Some questions have to be answered such as: What are the objectives that can be assigned to intercultural dialogue on peace? Who is responsible for the agenda? What are the minimum requirements, risks, inherent traps and pitfalls? What are the perceptions of the concept of "equality in dialogue"? How can reason and emotion be conciliated? What kind of cultural literacy and intercultural skills are needed to discover and rethink the new plural reality of our societies? What ways to involve the non-involved or the marginalized, so that many voices can be heard in this quest for genuine intercultural dialogue? What are the available mechanisms and what new interventions and educational processes are needed to help develop the necessary intercultural skills for such a dialogue? In brief, how can intercultural dialogue be translated into concrete results that impact peace and development, moving beyond talk to action?

(iii) deliver better policies targeted at the most appropriate level with creative partnerships, such as between governmental institutions, academia, medias and other decision and opinion makers in the service of development and peace. How can such partnerships and relationships be sustained over time? How can these partnerships be extended, beyond the governmental and non-governmental sphere, to the private sector, which may find it worthwhile to renew its commitment to sustainable development as it is evident that cultural diversity and the economy are far from being incompatible, since cultural diversity fosters creativity and innovation? Furthermore, how can the new path paved by the recognition of individuals with plural identities contribute to foster citizenship and social cohesion? Still three major challenges have to be addressed in our increasingly diversified societies: (i) the “hyper-culturalization” of social issues, which makes culture the major cause of all kinds of problems; (ii) assimilation policies based on the assumption that cultural diversity is a threat to national unity, social cohesion and development and (iii) segregation in the name of particularism, or in other words stressing differences to the extent where they become incompatible with a public life.

In conclusion, the acknowledgement of “cultural diversity in dialogue” becomes the key to harmonious coexistence not only between nations but also within each nation. Though this internal diversity was long regarded as a threat to national unity and social cohesion - from the claims of historical minorities or the expectations of the immigrant groups - it is now being increasingly taken into account and even considered as a source of individual and collective fulfilment. International security cannot be divorced from the evolution of intercultural relations, provided that “cultural diversity in dialogue” reveals the underlying unity of humanity.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to explore more fully what means “mainstreaming the principles of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in various policies and actions for sustainable development and peace by identifying opportunities and gaps”. To be effective, these policies need not only to build the relationship between cultural diversity and development, but also to prove the added value that the inclusion of cultural diversity offers to development, i.e. to bring cultural policy and development policy closer together and to strengthen capacities, opportunities and frameworks for collaboration. Finally, they need to translate the universal principles of peace (i.e. democratic principles, human rights, justice, freedom and solidarity) into action while encouraging appropriation of these fundamental principles by all cultures in order to be effectively exercised and therefore lead to peace, rather than remaining as abstract standards, or even standards imposed by others.