

Concept note

WORLD FORUM for INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

7-9 April, 2011

Baku, Republic of Azerbaijan

Based on the global agenda on the Dialogue among Civilisations adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (November 2001), the UNESCO Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), the Islamic Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which was issued by ISESCO in 2004, Declaration and Action Plan of the Third Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe member states, the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (May 2008), Baku Declaration for the Promotion of Intercultural Dialogue Government of Azerbaijan initiated to host the **World Forum for Intercultural Dialogue on 7-9 April, 2011 in Baku** under patronage of **H.E. Mr. Ilham Aliyev, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan** in the framework of the Baku process launched at the Conference of Ministers responsible for Culture in Europe and its neighbouring regions (December, 2008). The aim of the “Baku process” is to establish a platform in which today’s challenges can be discussed in the spirit of intercultural dialogue and universal values.

Why in Azerbaijan?

Azerbaijan is one of the unique places where different cultures and civilizations meet at the crossroad between the East and the West, the North and the South. At the same time, being a member of both Islamic and European organizations Azerbaijan absorbs the values of both civilizations, thus enabling it to assume a role of genuine bridge. This is not casual that many international conferences - the Conference of Ministers of Culture of Europe and its neighbouring regions (December, 2008), the Conference on Role of Women in Cross-Cultural Dialogue (June, 2008) the Conference of Culture Ministers of Islamic Countries (October, 2009), the Ministerial Roundtable on “Fostering Dialogue and Cultural Diversity – Baku Process: New Challenge for Dialogue between Civilizations “, the Conference of Culture Ministers of Turkic Speaking Countries (October, 2009), a Summit of World Religious Leaders (April, 2010) were organized in Baku.

Why intercultural dialogue?

As that worrisome challenge has risen up the political agenda, the notion of ‘intercultural dialogue’ has emerged as a simple and clear description of the requirement of the moment. The risk is the perpetual division of society and the international community into various versions of a collectivised ‘self’ and ‘other’, defined along lines of religion, skin colour, language or nationality, or some combination of these. And the solution must entail a breaking down of such stereotyped identities through genuine talking, and listening, by individuals, NGOs, governments and transgovernmental organisations.

Even though this is a novel line of inquiry, a significant body of understanding and good practice has developed, perhaps consolidated to the greatest extent to date in the 2008 [White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue](#) produced by the Council of Europe and subsequently translated into several languages. But this is a challenge on a global, not just a European, scale—not only in the sense that no part of the world is

immune from cultural intolerance but also in that globalisation has had a 'dark side'. In engendering a world of much greater, and ever-increasing, uncertainty, it has paradoxically enhanced the appeal of authoritarian and populist forces anxious that the global 'we' of the world's teeming arrivals lounge should be reduced to the reassuring antagonism of 'us' against 'them'.

Intercultural dialogue is currently a concern of the United Nations (particularly through the Alliance of Civilizations and UNESCO), of the Council of Europe (and its partner North-South Centre) and a range of other transnational organisations: the European Union, ALECSO, ISESCO, the Anna-Lindh Euro-Med Foundation for dialogue between cultures and so on. It is also a concern of governments, particularly as they have found that the old models of managing cultural diversity—of assimilationism or multiculturalism—no longer seem adequate to an increasing challenge. And it is a pressing issue for NGOs, for businesses and for cultural practitioners on the ground. So how can this vast array of manifestations of dialogue be conducted so that it sounds like an orchestra rather than just a cacophony of noise?

There is thus a need to map out what a world without dividing lines would look like and how it can be realised. It is in this context that the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue will take stock of where, as a global community, we find ourselves in 2011 in addressing the challenge and try to define lines of development for the future. Since this is a work of exploration, and in the spirit of intercultural dialogue, it will be a participatory event, with several themes in play.

First, there is work to be done in clarifying the concept. There is, to date, only one recent academic volume elaborating the idea of intercultural dialogue as such and the challenge posed by aggressive nationalism, racism and xenophobia and other forms of intolerance can only be met with intellectual rigour from the other side. Defining more exactly what intercultural dialogue is, and does, and the context in which it takes place is thus one line of inquiry. Should, for example, there be an institute, in a higher education institution or consortium of institutions, specifically tasked with this work of academic broadening and deepening, in an internationalist spirit and a cross-disciplinary manner?

Secondly, intercultural dialogue can not succeed if it is purely ethereal. And breaking down the division between the 'self' and the 'other' necessitates a capacity to stand back and see oneself from the standpoint of the 'other'. Here then are two key reasons for a focus on how cultural activities in the narrow sense—like writing, and reading, a novel for instance—can contribute to intercultural dialogue. Such activities can appeal to the same visceral emotions as do those who reject dialogue, but in a positive way, and at best they can encourage a capacity for reflection, by presenting other roles and possibilities which might be difficult for the average citizen to create in their own mind. So culture as practice, as well as culture as domain, is worthy of further discussion.

Thirdly, we need to know more about what makes for success in intercultural dialogue. Although we are all different, there is something in common and nothing brings us closer to each other than the community of moral values and ethics. So best practices making this dialogue feasible is to identify these basic values that run through and are inherent to all cultures and beliefs.

Last but not least, intercultural dialogue can never be really meaningful if it is confined to political elites (and international conferences). How can citizens at large be inspired to engage in it 'spontaneously'? One particular focus might be on the

roles women can, do, might or should play in taking part in, and facilitating, dialogue. This is partly because issues of gender equality keep coming up in intercultural conversations. It is partly also because common experiences as women may create bonds between female citizens of differing cultural backgrounds, on which foundation intercultural dialogue can more readily take place. Yet women are often in subordinate positions in the social hierarchy. So how can their participation in dialogue be enhanced? Specific emphasis should also be put to the role of the youth as a potential driving force in intercultural dialogue, taking due account of the fact that the youth frequently serves as both the target and instrument for certain political forces which do not pursue lofty goals.

These considerations have informed the programme for the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, to ensure that it adds value significantly to the dialogue *on* dialogue. If it proves to be a success, it may become only the first of an annual or biennial series. This would address a significant 'co-ordination dilemma'.

Apart from possible initiatives suggested above, a current World Forum for Intercultural Dialogue to be held in Baku on 7-9 April, 2011 could provide a regular opportunity simply for contacts to be made and exchanges to be arranged. The Baku Global Forum programme has thus also been constructed to allow for meetings of cognate groups on the day before the event and for informal networking around its margins. The list of invitees has also been developed to ensure a highly diverse group of individuals, in every sense, comes together at the event. Encounters may well be of as much or even greater value when individuals working in different sectors, rather than different global regions, get the opportunity to 'exchange notes' on their experiences.

The forum will also provide a platform for the launch of new practical initiatives. For example, key actors in intercultural dialogue are urban municipalities, for a number of reasons. Negatively, intercultural conflicts are heavily concentrated in cities around the world: ethnic riots are very largely urban phenomena. More positively, local authorities are closer to the ground than national governments and may be more cognisant with the particular intercultural concerns which stem from their demographic composition. They may also have more credibility in dealing with these problems and have more face-to-face connections with NGOs and the level of the street. These factors explain the success to date of the Intercultural Cities pilot project developed by the Council of Europe in partnership with the European Union. So the Baku World Forum aims to be a 'talking shop'—in the best possible, rather than pejorative, sense of that phrase.