



12 PRINCIPLES FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AT LOCAL LEVEL



The Congress



Le Congrès

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE LOCAL RELIGIOUS SITUATION

01 Local authorities are invited to note the growing role that religion is now playing in the **construction of individual and collective identities**, and its impact on socialisation and the formation of social representations, and on many of their citizens' view of the world. Religion is the expression and result of a system of beliefs passed down from generation to generation and of loyalty to a tradition. It helps to mould people's way of thinking and establishes values and rules of conduct.

02 These authorities must have a good **knowledge** of the relative size of local religious groups and how they are organised. They must be seen to be aware that through their teaching and training and the services they offer, the activities of local religious organisations are of real benefit to the public. They offer their members a sense of meaning and help to create social relationships, and as such are fully fledged partici-

pants in local society. Awareness of the place and role of ethnic and/or religious minorities might usefully be accompanied by an equal awareness of the latent authority exercised by the **majority**, who generally has a quasi-monopoly of local levers of power. Such an approach will help to prevent minorities being pushed, against their better judgment, into defensive postures. Particular attention will be paid to the role of families, and especially of mothers, who help to transmit their cultural values to the next generation, in an attitude of openness to society.

03 Religious organisations should be considered not as homogeneous entities but as organisations that are themselves the subject of sometimes **conflicting views**. Local authorities' decision as to which interlocutors will be open to dialogue while at the same in a position to influence their own community is therefore critical, for both the present and future.

PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS IN THE DIALOGUE

04 Local authorities must contribute to the process of **discovering other cultures**, by observing cultural similarities **and** differences, understanding those whose outlook is different and at variance with local custom and practice and disseminating and sharing this information. They can do so by encouraging the teaching of the full range of religious knowledge, with a view to developing cultural knowledge and not religious practices. Such education, provided both at school and through civic religious study centres, will be a key factor in fostering greater openness and a quest for knowledge. Openness to others may also awaken a desire for a better understanding of one's own faith or one's own personal and social values, thus helping through greater cultural awareness to reduce the risk of radicalisation. This action will be guided by a desire to create conditions for equality between women and men and to ensure that these come into play.

05 Local authorities must identify **opportune moments** for developing mutual knowledge and person to person contacts and for reducing feelings of mistrust, and even fear. The aim should be a steady progression from ignorance to knowledge, from knowledge to understanding and from understanding to confidence. Relevant activities might include visits to different places of worship or the establishment of an annual intercultural or interfaith forum or festival. This could be accompanied by the institution of a council for intercultural and interfaith relations, as a focus for multilateral exchanges of view.

ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIP

06 Local authorities are in the **front line** and their active presence on the ground, their familiarity with all those concerned and their capacity for innovation gives them a leading and fully **legitimate** role in relation to religious activities. Their discussions and activities must be guided by a concern for openness, innovation and experimentation.

07 Local authorities' role in promoting dialogue and establishing partnerships will be more effective and valid in the long term if **certain conditions are met from the outset**:

- ▶ respect for legality;
- ▶ promotion of equality between women and men;
- ▶ religious neutrality and non-discrimination;
- ▶ transparency in all their activities.

08 Local authorities should not become directly involved in the conduct of interfaith dialogue. The principles of subsidiarity and religious autonomy should be bars to official sponsorship or organisation of such dialogue. The official stance should be one of **non-indifference** and **non-interference**. Local authorities' role is essentially that of facilitators, mediators or, if necessary, regulators, on the basis of clearly defined and negotiated objectives. From their standpoint, namely that of studied neutrality, interfaith dialogue is in fact based on reason rather than faith, knowledge rather than belief.

09 By emphasising the notions of recognition and confidence, local authorities can ensure that religions are seen not as a problem but as a **resource**, through the adoption of a positive attitude to the democratic management of pluralism. Their activities should be geared to two objectives: establishing a more **coherent organisational** structure for local religious confessions and strengthening **social cohesion**. The bodies and partners involved in the dialogue should not step outside their own specific roles, and should treat the dialogue first and foremost as a shared asset that needs to be encouraged.

10 Activities such as building or managing places of worship should be designed to promote balance and harmony and should encourage greater openness and not ghettoisation. This means that an **interfaith approach** must gradually take precedence over a multi-faith one. Local authority activities should be guided by a concern to promote a shared belief in a God with many faces.

11 Local authorities' concern with religious diversity and interfaith dialogue needs to be reflected in concrete terms in local social, sports, education, town planning and cultural policies and in their relations with local associations, thus giving it a **transversal dimension**. As such it must influence and inform all fields of activity rather than constituting a specific area. If all those concerned are willing to listen to each other, it will be possible to achieve what the Canadians call a «**reasonable accommodation**», which means offering confessions the maximum opportunity to express their religious beliefs, so long as this does not conflict with other fundamental rights.

EVALUATION

12 In consultation with local religious organisations, local authorities should determine in advance, what **criteria and indicators** they should use to assess the effectiveness of their intercultural and interfaith dialogue. These might include the development of their own expertise and the establishment of networks for exchanges between faiths or of training and information centers. They should also enter into contact with representatives of other local authorities to compare and contrast their different arrangements in order to develop their own particular approach.

For the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue is a crucial element of the dialogue between the various groups that make up our local communities.

It is an effective tool in the fight against intolerance and radicalisation and in strengthening «living together» in mutual respect.

The Congress started its work on this theme with two conferences, organised in 2006 and 2010 in Montchanin, France. At these events, local government representatives, academics as well as international organisations and religious leaders participated in the discussions, which focused on the role of local authorities in interreligious dialogue - in particular the exchange of good practice, the principles of secularism, religious education, training of religious leaders and the financing of places of worship. These 12 principles complement the ideas presented in the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue «Living together as equals in dignity» adopted in 2008.

www.coe.int/congress-intercultural
congress.intercultural@coe.int

Published: March 2016

ENG

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, 28 of which are members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 47 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 648 elected officials representing more than 200 000 local and regional authorities.



The Congress

Le Congrès

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE