GFMD 2016: 2nd Thematic Workshop - Migration for Harmonious Societies

Geneva, 18 May 2016

Concept Note

We live in a world where more and more people are on the move, making societies much more diverse places to live in. Generational differences, are now much sharper than before and the social media are giving rise to a multiplicity of communities many of which are trans-national in nature. There is increasing recognition of the fact that, if well governed, diversity brings skills and creativity. Unfortunately, it is also true that under the worst of circumstances the experiment can fail, leading to needless frustration and, resentment on both sides. Many past policy efforts have focused on interventions that could eventually make people "more alike". And unaddressed, this trend is unlikely to change.

The purpose of this thematic workshop is to explore ways forward to foster response to the challenge of achieving harmony in the midst of diversity. In this context and further to the social issues migration raises, a twofold dilemma remains unresolved: first, what makes a society hold together and provide it with a strong sense of common identity and purpose? Second, what are the circumstances that would allow a society to be diverse **and** cohesive at the same time?

Following are some of the key issues and concerns that may have to be weighed to determine the best way forward.

- **Coming to terms with the "other": integration as a process of co-creation**. At various times in the past, responsibility for the adjustment has been placed on the shoulders of newcomers. It can be conceived that there must be adaptation and change, but then, a new question arises: how much? On the other hand, there is a need also for the host community to 'accommodate', respect and facilitate the integration of the new comers. Thereby initiating a process aiming at the creation of a new whole through mutual adjustment.

- **Human rights and security concerns**. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights offers an important starting point by upholding human rights that aim at assuring the enjoyment of culture and its components in conditions of equality, human dignity and non-discrimination. At the same time, there are multiple levels and types of concern that require dispassionate and objective examination, having to do with the management of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, the management of xenophobia, the issue of youth radicalization and disaffection, but above all the need for preventive measures to create a sense of belonging among those at risk of becoming marginalized or alienated.

- **The shaping of the public discourse on migrants and migration**. The current migration "debate" is largely one-sided, with emphasis on the short term and a strong security focus, driven by mounting fears and negative stereotypes. Such an attitude does not encourage empathy for and interest in ideas and practices that are different from one's own. The end result is a negative migration narrative and an inability to appreciate the many ways in which migrants can enrich the social and economic fabric. The media have a significant influence over public discourse on migration, influencing public opinion and thereby impinging on all stakeholders, especially political figures and policy makers. Co-existence requires a broad-minded attitude toward those whose opinions, beliefs, practices, racial or ethnic origins, differ from one's own.

- **Holding on to ties that bind to achieve harmony in the midst of diversity.** A new paradigm may be available to contemporary socially diverse societies. It might be possible to imagine a social set up that is firmly based on a core of fundamental, universal values to which everyone could adhere to (for instance, non-discrimination, democracy, the rule of law, equality for all), while such social set up would ensure accelerated socio-economic development. From this point of departure, one could envisage, as a complement, country-specific values, cultural norms, codes of conduct, and shared histories that would provide additional strong social bonds. These two sets of principles would be the ties that bind. But they would also provide constituent members of the society with a common sense of unity **and** the confidence to accept expressions of social and cultural diversity. Migrants would have much to bring to that construction in terms of creativity, innovation, skills and know-how.

Breakout Sessions

This thematic workshop will focus on the following two issues: (i) Creation of common values and norms while taking account of cultural specificities; and (ii) Creating Harmony in the midst of diversity.

Session 1: Creation of common values and norms while taking account of cultural specificities
Democracy, rule of law, equality, elimination of all forms of discrimination, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion are just some of the values a society may aspire to have, but these values may not be considered universal in all States. There might be differences even within local communities about how they define their historical and cultural values.

Against this background:

1. What legal and institutional measures are in place to ensure a peaceful, non-discriminatory and inclusive society in your country, with particular reference to:

    a.   Facilitating participation of men and women from varied cultural backgrounds, including migrants?

b.   Stakeholder involvement in increasing community participation, fostering a sense of belonging among migrants and building social cohesion in the face of growing cultural diversity?

Session 2: Creating harmony in the midst of diversity

Given the prevalence of human mobility in our contemporary world, modern societies are all – to a greater or lesser extent – diverse societies. Rise of political leadership in various parts of the world from generations of migrant communities vouch for the reality of such diversity and that harmony can prevail within diversity. While migrants are all expected to be members of one common polity, they bring with them a wealth of social and cultural capital that can be shared for the enjoyment of all. As much as immigrants are expected to abide by the local cultural norms and embrace the shared values and local national identity, they should also have the space and freedom to preserve their heritage.

Against this background:

1.   How can initiatives to support cultural and social cohesion, human rights and gender equality be implemented to promote broader appreciation of co-existence of different cultures (e.g. through media, educational curricula and pre-departure programmes)?

- What experiences have governments had in developing such initiatives?

2.   How could regional and international institutions and processes, including for local government involvement, be better geared towards cooperation and collaboration on inclusive and harmonious societies?

Further reading

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