



The EU and intercultural dialogue

Intercultural dialogue (ICD) has multiple definitions but is increasingly seen as a means of promoting mutual understanding and exchange, so encouraging people of different cultures to live together harmoniously.

Based on a body of legislation encompassing respect for human rights and the fight against discrimination, ICD is a horizontal EU priority which has an impact on a wide range of core EU policies, such as education and culture, employment and social affairs, cohesion and development aid.

Cultural diversity is a fundamental EU value, but it can also lead to rejection, intolerance and discrimination, and cause incomprehension, social fragmentation and conflict.

Despite a comprehensive framework of anti-discrimination law, EU citizens still experience discrimination in their countries, as revealed by a Eurobarometer survey. This explains the need to turn ICD into a political objective and accounts for the EU support provided through various policy measures, initiatives and funds, including for ICD with third countries.

However, ICD is one political instrument amongst others and cannot on its own provide rapid solutions to the complex problems of today's society (ghettoisation, violence, terrorism, etc.) even though it can help reduce them.



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In this briefing:

- Context
- Cherish diversity, fight discrimination
- Support for ICD within the EU
- EU support for ICD with third countries
- Criticism of ICD
- Further reading

Context

The origin

Speaking of the creation of the European Communities, Jean Monnet is believed to have said that, if it had to be done again, he would start with culture.

In recent years, especially since 11 September 2001, the need to understand other peoples' cultures has grown into a political objective and a means to help combat terrorism.

The promotion of intercultural dialogue (ICD) has, in a sense, always been at the heart of European integration. Its horizontal nature makes it a strategic priority in a wide range of EU policy areas from education and culture to employment and social cohesion, and from immigration to external relations.

However, there is no empirical evidence that ICD alone can provide rapid solutions to complex problems such as intolerance, ghettoisation, and violence. But it can, most likely, contribute to their alleviation.

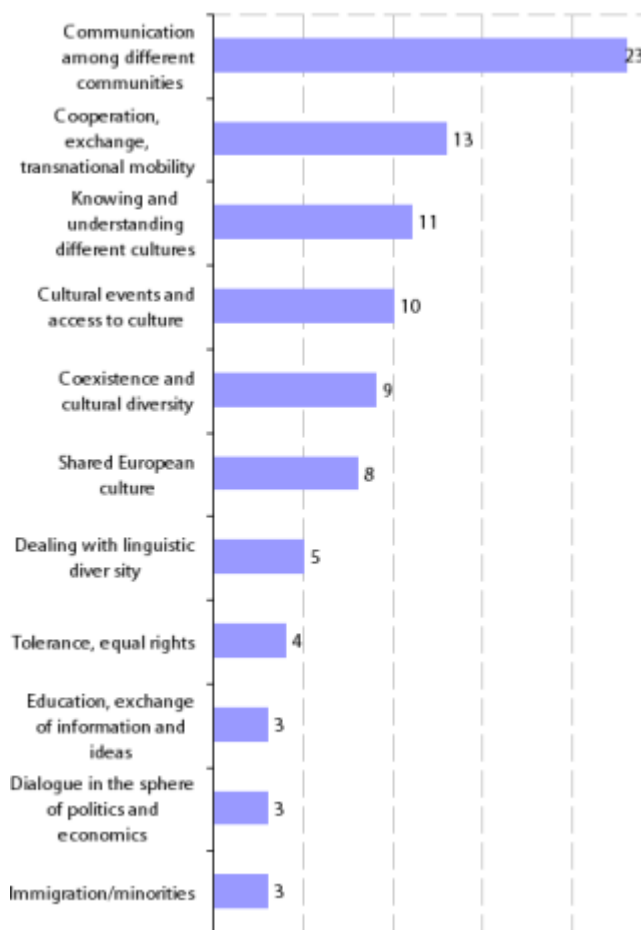
What is ICD?

"Intercultural dialogue" appeared as a catch-all term in the 1990s. In spite of its lack of conceptual clarity, it gradually made its way into the political debate, and in 1995 emerged for the first time in an international legal instrument – the Council of Europe [Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities](#). At international level,

the United Nations declared 2001 the [International year of Dialogue among Civilisations](#). In 2008, the EU followed with the [European Year of Intercultural Dialogue](#).

However, ICD is a concept which is difficult to define. Overall, it encompasses the processes related to the coexistence of and communication between different peoples and cultures, in a way that respects the diversity of cultural identities.

Figure 1 - Meanings of "intercultural dialogue"



Data source: [Flash Eurobarometer, 2007](#).

In its 2008 [White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue](#), the Council of Europe (CoE) defines ICD as *"an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect"*.

The CoE further describes ICD as a prerequisite of inclusive societies and a tool for

mediation and reconciliation. It is also believed to be instrumental in addressing concerns of social fragmentation by fostering [integration and social cohesion](#).

A Eurobarometer [survey](#) on ICD in the 27 EU Member States highlights some specific aspects of the perception of Europeans on this issue, as revealed by Figure 1. Overall, EU citizens relate ICD to meanings with positive connotations. The difficulty in defining ICD is confirmed by the respondents: 36% of them were not able to provide a spontaneous definition of the term. The most frequently recorded association with ICD is "communication among different communities" – 23%. "cooperation, exchange and transnational mobility" comes second with 13%, closely followed by "living together, knowing and understanding different cultures" (11%). In addition, 83% of those interviewed declare that they value the benefits of intercultural contacts, and 65% report having interacted with at least one person of a different religion, ethnicity or nationality to their own in the week prior to being questioned.

Legal basis

Not being a legal concept, ICD is not regulated by national, European or international law, strictly speaking. Instead it relies on an international framework aimed at the respect of human rights and cultural diversity.

The EU facilitates and promotes the development of ICD. Articles 2 and 3 of the [Treaty on EU](#) define the core EU values, among which are democracy, equality and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities. These values are complemented by pluralism and non-discrimination.

In the EU, dialogue among cultures also implies [fighting discrimination](#). Two EU directives ensure the horizontal inclusion of the fight against discrimination in the different EU policies: the [Racial Equality Directive](#) and the [Employment Framework Directive](#).

In addition, the EU guarantees the respect of cultural and linguistic diversity and the safeguarding of its cultural heritage (Article 3 TEU).

The [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) also prohibits discrimination on any ground (Article 21) and guarantees the protection of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity (Article 22).

Finally, article 167 (3 & 4) of the [Treaty on the functioning of the EU](#) (TFEU) requires the EU to promote cultural cooperation with third countries and international organisations, in particular the Council of Europe, as a contribution to the dialogue between cultures.

These principles are also enshrined in the 2005 UNESCO [Convention](#) on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and as a [party to the Convention](#), the EU is committed to making cultural diversity an essential element of its external action and to developing an active cultural role for Europe in its [international relations](#).

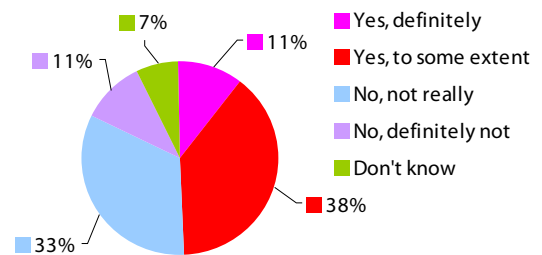
Cherish diversity, fight discrimination

The EU is now one of the main destinations of migration, home to more and more people of different nationalities, religions and cultures. In this context, cultural, ethnic and religious diversity brings new social and political challenges. For example, increased interaction can lead to friction between cultures and give rise to identity-linked tensions. This, in turn, can trigger fear and rejection.

Despite the presence of specific legislation, EU citizens still report experiencing or witnessing discrimination. A Eurobarometer [survey](#) reveals that 16% of those interviewed suffered discrimination in the previous year and over a quarter of them (26%) witnessed discrimination or harassment.

In addition, 44% of those interviewed consider that not enough effort is made to fight discrimination, as shown by Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Is enough effort made in your country to fight all forms of discrimination?



Data source: [Special Eurobarometer](#), 2009.

Ethnic origin is the highest reported of the different grounds for discrimination: 61% of respondents considered discrimination on the grounds of race or ethnic origin to be commonplace.

In this context, ICD appears as a [tool in fighting rejection and violence](#). Its efficiency, though, would tend to depend on the degree of development of democratic culture, i.e. willingness to engage in dialogue, search for compromise, open-mindedness, capacity to resolve conflicts by peaceful means, etc.

Ultimately, the challenge facing EU society is to find ways of reconciling and protecting its multiple cultural identities while promoting universally shared values.

Support for ICD within the EU

The development of the competences needed to foster intercultural exchange and promote ICD contributes to a number of [strategic EU priorities](#), including respect and promotion of cultural diversity, solidarity, social justice and social cohesion. A number of EU policies and programmes create the conditions for such dialogue among cultures.

Culture programme 2007-2013

In May 2007, the European Commission launched the [European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World](#). Two of its three main

objectives – "*promotion of [cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue](#), and promotion of culture as a vital element in the EU's [international relations](#)" – are aimed at successfully addressing the intercultural challenges facing the EU.*

Focus on inter-religious dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is one element of ICD. Its role is highlighted in Article 17 TFEU which states that the Union "*shall maintain an open, transparent and [regular dialogue](#)" with the churches and religious communities of the Member States. In addition, Article 19 TFEU empowers the Union to combat discrimination based on religion or belief. This is implemented mainly through [EU anti-discrimination law](#).*

Legal provisions addressing the issue of employees wearing religious symbols in public places are included in the [Employment Equality Directive](#), which prohibits direct discrimination based on religious grounds. However, the proportionate occupational requirements are not considered discriminatory.

[Practitioners](#) argue that for the last decade, the EU has been the driving force toward a more effective implementation of anti-discrimination law in Europe. In contrast, the decisions of the [European Court of Human Rights](#) are described as "a poor bargain" since they are based on Article 9 of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) which does allow that manifestations of expression of freedom of thought, conscience and religion be restricted in the name of public safety, public order, health or morals, or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. In practice, there have been very few cases in which the Court has concluded that a Member State was in breach of its obligations.

In the framework of the [European Year of Intercultural Dialogue](#), the European Parliament [exchanged views](#) with religious personalities from different confessions such as Patriarch Bartholomew; Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth; Sheikh Ahmad Badr El Din El Hassoun, Grand Mufti of Syria; Indian spiritual leader Satguru Baba Hardev Ji; and the 14th Dalai Lama.

Education and language-learning

The competences necessary for ICD are not

automatically acquired; they need to be learnt from an early age. In this context, public authorities, education professionals, NGOs, religious communities and the media all have a role to play. A valuable tool in this respect is the [Erasmus](#) programme, which enables some 200 000 young Europeans each year to study in another Member State and get exposed to different cultures. A parallel programme, [Erasmus Mundus](#), provides EU-funded scholarships for non-EU citizens participating in approved European graduate degree programmes, as well as scholarships for EU citizens studying at partner universities around the world.

ICD requires the ability to express oneself, as well as the capacity to understand others. The EU is facilitating [language learning](#) through a framework of policies and initiatives. A recent Eurobarometer [survey](#) reveals that 57% of those interviewed find that the most or second most important benefit of their learning mobility period abroad is their improved foreign language skills, while 40% report greater awareness of another culture to be the first or second benefit.

European Year of Intercultural Dialogue

The EU designated 2008 '[European Year of Intercultural Dialogue](#)' (EYID). Its aim was to encourage all people living in Europe to explore both the benefits of cultural heritage and the opportunities to learn from different cultural traditions. A total of €2.4 million was dedicated to the co-financing of a number of [flagship projects](#), including [projects supporting inter-religious dialogue](#). Out of the preparations for the EYID grew a civil society initiative called [Platform for Intercultural Europe](#) which brings together members from many sectors – culture and education, minority rights and the fight against racism. The project [Intercultural cities](#), was launched as a joined initiative of the Commission and the Council of Europe.

Source: [European Commission](#), 2009

European Social Fund (ESF)

The EU promotes ICD and offers assistance for socially excluded persons, such as minorities and immigrants, through the [ESF](#). It supports activities fighting discrimination in access to employment and in the workplace through:

- Reintegration into employment for groups suffering discrimination; and
- Increasing the participation of migrants in employment to strengthen their social integration.

EU support for ICD with third countries

ICD is a key factor in the EU's international relations and an important element of its commitment to multilateralism. Its role was specifically recognised in the June 2008 European Council [conclusions](#). In addition, it is one of the EU's main instruments for [mediation, reconciliation, conflict prevention](#) and the [fight against terrorism](#).

For the period 2007-2013, EU action in this field is financed through two types of instruments: geographical and thematic ones. The former include the [European Development Fund](#) (in the ACP countries), the [Development Cooperation Instrument](#) (in Latin America, Asia and South Africa), and the [European Neighbourhood & Partnership Instrument](#) (in the [neighbouring regions](#)). The [Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation](#) for the Dialogue between Cultures is an example of an action funded under the ENPI. Other initiatives funded through geographical instruments include [Euromed Heritage](#), [Euromed Audiovisual](#) and the [EU-ACP cultural support programme](#).

The [Investing in people](#) programme is an example of a thematic instrument. It injects €50 million into policies allowing better access to and preservation of local culture, and strengthening contacts between cultural actors as a way of fostering multicultural and multiethnic dialogue.

Criticism of ICD

Although professionals and NGOs tend to agree on the fact that ICD plays an important role as a means of mediation and reconciliation, some criticism has been voiced with respect to its capacity to

The EU and intercultural dialogue

successfully address structural issues such as racism and poverty.

For example, some [authors](#) claim that policy-makers tend to focus on surface interaction, with the risk that social fragmentation can be put down to the lack of desire of individuals to communicate, or their inability to function in a given cultural group. This could displace the problems instead of setting up mechanisms to tackle them.

Others criticise the lack of coherence between the European Commission's interest in ICD and its day-to-day policy-making. Former MEP Ruth Hieronymi [pointed out](#) that ICD would not be possible without protecting cultural diversity. She warned against the risk that media and creative sectors from smaller countries would be "eaten up by big business" if submitted to ordinary competition rules.

Overall, there is a lack of evaluation of the efficiency of ICD, which makes it difficult to determine its real impact on the ground.

Further reading

[Sharing diversity national approaches to intercultural dialogue in Europe/](#) ERICarts, 2008.

[Living together as equals in dignity/](#) Council of Europe, 2010.

[Inter-religious dialogue: briefing paper/](#) Malik, Jamal, Policy Department B, PE 369.019, Brussels: European Parliament, 2006.

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