

Probation Practice and Citizenship, Good Relations and the Emerging European Intercultural Agenda

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Summary: It is imperative that criminal justice agencies see the goals of wider Good Relations and delivering a service to different citizens as central to their practice. Staff seeking to build Good Relations between people from ‘different religious beliefs, political opinions and racial groups’ (NI Act 1998, Section 2) must be supported to maintain a critical distance from their personal traditions and the communities they serve if, professionally, they are to work towards a model of citizenship not partisanship. From 2003 to 2006 an across-grade development group of staff in the Probation Board for Northern Ireland considered how the service could support Good Relations. The Good Relations tasks of staff were understood to be to promote personal development and to grow an ease with meeting difference within the agency and with clients. The PBNI initiative is relevant to people and organisations, in any jurisdiction, seeking to enable citizenship and accommodate diversity. It is now time to build civic-minded organisations and public institutions that become blocks to the toleration of demeaning behaviours and establish Good Relations between our diverse citizens as an intercultural and citizenship-based necessity.

Keywords: Good Relations, citizenship, sectarianism, racism, organisational learning, interculturalism, equity, diversity, interdependence.

The other is the limit beyond which our ambitions must
not run and the boundary beyond which our
life must not expand.
(Niebuhr 1952, p. 137)

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Good Relations, interculturalism and living with equal and different citizens

Over three years, from 2003 to 2006, a developmental action research programme involving an across-grade development group of Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) staff addressed the theme of promoting Good Relations (NI Act 1998, Section 75(2b)) within the practices of board members and staff (Wilson 2006).

Although the staff group obtained a mandate to promote this theme, and secured this strand within the specific business objectives of the PBNI's corporate plan for 2006 to 2008, further development had to be curtailed for financial reasons. The significant motivation and progress by staff meeting the obstacle of inadequate resources disappointed all involved; however this is a common experience for developmental groups as change processes move peripheral themes into the centre of an already crowded organisational business plan (Senge 1994). This team understood that Good Relations could no longer be a peripheral theme in a contested society.

The Northern Ireland Office highlighted the PBNI initiative as contributing to its departmental obligations under the Race Equality Strategy launched by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in March 2006. In securing a devolved administration in 2007, an agreed criminal justice system will bring Good Relations into sharper relief. Potentially, the work of the PBNI group could become one model that invites other criminal justice agencies to make similar corporate commitments.

As the Good Relations implementation plan (OFMDFM 2006), overseen by the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, gains momentum, it is to be hoped that the substantial agenda developed by the PBNI group will be actioned more fully. The learning accumulated by the group and the proposals they made around post-qualifying and organisational development were well worked out and ready for implementation.

Addressing the need to promote Good Relations between people from different religious beliefs, political opinions and racial groups is not just a peculiarity of Northern Ireland. This initiative resonates with and informs the questioning of multiculturalist approaches as many previously committed to these approaches consider the intercultural agenda. Sondhi (2006), responding to the above-mentioned Race Equality Strategy launch, pointed out how:

... multiculturalism is now in question, not only from traditional sceptics but from voices on the left and the liberal centre. ... The charge now levelled at multiculturalism is that it created a false sense of harmony by establishing a system for the distribution of power and resources which worked for a while but that was unable to adapt to change. ... At the local level it is argued that the system encouraged the creation of culturally and spatially distinct communities fronted by 'community leaders' where difference became the very currency by which importance was judged and progress made.

It is now argued that multiculturalism has promoted group identity at the expense of securing a common experience of citizenship between different people. There is a parallel existing with the growth of single identity work in Northern Ireland. While Sondhi went on to argue that there 'was much within multiculturalism, particularly as it is being reformed through community cohesion and other critiques, which still speak to our neighbourhoods', he proposed the intercultural approach as being important to promote. The 'intercultural approach goes beyond equal opportunities and respect for existing cultural differences to the pluralist transformation of public space, institutions and civic culture. An intercultural approach aims to facilitate dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different backgrounds' (Sondhi 2006). This model consolidates the experience of equal and different citizens meeting and working together and is aligned with the PBNI's Good Relations approach (Wilson 2006).

The challenge of accommodating diversity has become a central theme in the nation-states of the expanded European Union, both with the diversity of people and traditions within the EU and the wider challenge of welcoming and accommodating those wishing to settle in the EU from outside it. The Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain all have to meet the modern challenge of securing citizenship as the base on which equal and different citizens have their place secured.

One task of policing, the courts, the prison service and probation is to hold people to account when they behave in ways that humiliate and abuse others different to them. In Britain, the changing nature of racism means that there has been a growth in the level of inter-ethnic violence in addition to what were, primarily, racist actions of 'white-on-black' (www.kenanmalik.com). People from all traditions and cultures now face

the challenge of being at ease with those different to them, accepting them as equal and different citizens. In the vibrant economy of the Republic of Ireland, there is an increasingly diverse population, and while the historical racial antipathy to the Traveller community remains, a wider range of people who are full citizens or residents have become the focus of racism (Watt and McGaughey 2006). In Northern Ireland, as Table 1 illustrates, there was an increase in reported racial attacks from April 2002 to March 2007.

Table 1. Reported racial incidents in Northern Ireland, 2002–2007

<i>Year</i>	<i>2002– 2003</i>	<i>2003– 2004</i>	<i>2004– 2005</i>	<i>2005– 2006</i>	<i>2006– 2007</i>
Reported incidents	226	453	813	936	1047

Source: PSNI 2007, p. 3

Probation services have the task of challenging the behaviour of people who have been convicted of crimes that feed fear in the wider society. These criminal actions draw on a base of unease with people different to them. In undertaking this work, probation supports the Good Relations agenda – hate crime being one of at least six drivers for such a Good Relations approach (Wilson 2005). Where such work succeeds, probation contributes to a lessening of fear about such actions occurring again, dissolves any movements towards revenge and retaliation that may be arising in communities and strengthens the law by showing that it holds people to account and assists rehabilitation (Wright 1996). As such, agreed law and order develops and equal citizenship experiences are patterned.

Good Relations work in an ethnic frontier: Learning for stable societies

An ethnic frontier

Wright (1996) identifies ‘ethnic frontier’ areas as places of divided loyalties and opposed identities. An ethnic frontier is characterised by the inability of either group finally to dominate the other, and peace, such as it exists within its boundaries, equals an uneasy tranquillity. In such places, deterrence of one tradition by the other and vice versa are

dominant dynamics. Such societies reveal the importance of securing agreed law and order systems, of addressing and establishing equal treatment and equality of opportunity in employment, of establishing freedom of cultural expression and of establishing fairness in education. Wright (1987) argues that the above themes are the dominant sites where the conflict emerges in most ethnic frontier societies. The PBNI, as a criminal justice agency, then has an important role beyond merely that of its own agency in this Good Relations practice, it contributes to whether the criminal justice sector is better regarded.

Ethnic frontier societies remind us that homogeneity cannot be protected by force, being at ease with difference is the goal

To be partisan in this time is to deny the diverse reality that is structuring our societies today. We are in a new world where states based on 'same and equal' now have to embrace 'diverse and equal' and at the same time promote 'interdependence and cohesion'. The old tools through which majorities assumed they knew best and assimilated or ignored minorities can no longer be used. Yet new models around being at ease with diversity are rare.

This new journey into being at ease with diversity will only start by building small local experiments. We need new knowledge that will come only from Good Relations practice that is committed to engaging in bold and imaginative projects and programmes. These programmes build relationships in which distrust based on religious understandings can be explored, intolerance of different political views can be engaged with and racist actions that deny people their equal place as citizens can be confronted.

Some people still wish for easy answers but they are no longer possible. Assimilating 'others' demeans people, getting rid of others is illegal and marginalising others, thankfully, increasingly brings out advocates for the scapegoats. Privatising and withdrawing from the debate only means that down the line these non-voters may become hostage to those who then gain power.

An alternative must now be considered. It is time to find ways to be at ease with difference outside rivalry and scapegoating (Wilson and Morrow 1996). Racism, homophobia, sectarianism, sexism and attacks on those with a learning disability and the aged are inter-linked by the same powerful dynamics of unease with difference. It is time to think about, design and create something that is unknown and untested.

Cementing partisanship or enabling citizenship?

Staying open to differences?

The nature of a communal conflict in an ethnic frontier area is that institutions and organisations can be experienced by people from the different traditions within it as being partial to one or other competing group. The culture of organisations is such that, without due diligence, they can become closed to difference. The reality of living in a conflict is that seeing one another as equal and different citizens becomes harder and people more readily see ‘others’ as members of opposing traditions and even as being dangerous for them. Even workers involved in voluntary, community and public organisations can collude with serving a narrower communal identity. They can readily lose sight of working to some higher order professional value base that is concerned with promoting and securing a just, sustainable and shared society, inclusive of people from different backgrounds and experiences (see www.jedini.com). In a contested society, workers need values and principles that challenge the growth of partisan practice.

In a contested society, when people are with ‘others’ they have little or no relationship with, they very readily see them as ‘those to be fearful of’ or ‘as dangers to them’ and draw on stories or personal experiences of distrust or hurt. When groups or traditions become the primary points of identity, experiences of being equal and different become less dominant in daily life. Because of these dynamics, the challenge for public agencies is to build secure relational spaces and organisations that are structurally and programmatically committed to acknowledging diversity. In so doing, they promote Good Relations.

A practice based on change being possible

Working for understanding in a contested society must be driven by the hope that change in the future can be secured. It has been the documented experience of colleagues that, even where such work has been only a fragile strand, such strands do exist and grow new choices for the people involved in them (Wilson 1994; Fitzduff 1989). There is a body of practice where patterns of trust have grown and ways of supporting such new relationships have developed that give hope and possibilities (Wilson and Tyrell 1995).

In working for Good Relations and reconciliation it is important to hold up a vision of a possible future together, without trivialising the

current realities felt by people caught up in a conflict. Staff need to work in a manner that does not overstate the extent to which trust develops yet remain patient and committed to this relational and structural task over periods of years. After a civil conflict it is necessary that society ‘learns to acknowledge and turn away from those evils in firm, institutionalised forms of the collective commitment, “never again”’ (Shriver 2005, p. ix). The PBNI initiative is one such practical institutional attempt. Some understandings informing this practice have been:

- Every person living within a culture or tradition has ‘cultural good reason’ for the positions they take. These positions are often difficult to question and can be associated with deep emotions. They are usually influenced by the beliefs and actions of friends, family and significant others.
- In each person the power of their traditions and the stories of whom to be fearful of can continually erode other, more fragile, experiences of meeting people from different backgrounds and traditions. These stories can prevent some people meeting others different to them whereas others take a risk and move forward.
- It is possible for people to change the ways in which they have acted. This is easier if the wider context or system around them supports them in this change. Building communal trust is much easier when the political, civic and public institutions define the promotion of understanding across lines of traditional hostility as a central priority for themselves. Tentative relationships between different people grow more readily when given wider structural support (Wilson and Morrow 1996).
- It is possible for people to change from a violent lifestyle and work for peace (Fitzduff 1989) and for people from very different backgrounds and traditions to develop experiences of trust and sustain these new relationships over time (Wilson 1994).

Promoting a mental model that relationships between equal and different citizens matter

Good Relations practice needs to be developed within a citizenship mental model (Senge 1994) that promotes equal and different citizenship and acknowledges ‘others’ as gifts not threats. One of the positive strands that remains alive after over 35 years of conflict is that reconciliation in a political form, as well as in local life, is still part of the

vocabulary in Northern Ireland, even though separation grows (Byrne *et al.* 2006). This search lies at the core of Good Relations practice and assists in addressing the growing racist attitudes and behaviours that have become public in recent years (ICR 2005).

Challenging the mental model of partisanship

There is the need for probation staff to challenge mental models that shape the actions and practice of some people and organisations. Such an active understanding insists that every person is an equal and different citizen sharing one place. This is the foundation stone on which Good Relations practice builds towards a more open, culturally diverse and inclusive society. Using these mental models to guide and check working practices involves moving through, and beyond, the historic distrust and fear at the centre of the recent political contest. It is also to create more openness to 'others' from different cultures and traditions who have come to live in this society and who wish to find a place, a job and even sanctuary.

Working with the lens of equal and different citizenship in a contested society is not easy. The high levels of separation and distinctive, often excluding, cultures means that partisanship is an easier model for many people to get by with. However, partisanship is a denial of the best values in community work and public service practice and is not a basis on which to secure a peaceful, shared and interdependent society. Good Relations work practice in a contested society has to be rooted in an explicit citizenship model. When staff are engaged with so-called single identity groups, then the worker has to become the 'other', challenging the group members to move towards a citizenship experience.

Good Relations practice and the 'push and pull' dynamics of an ethnic frontier

In an ethnic frontier, when fears are high, space for innovative organisational work is often small, whereas when fears are low, there is more space (Wright 1988). Staff have to be prepared to push for challenges when they can, knowing that some progress might fall back. Such practice is to push for the civic mind, whenever possible, knowing that the partisan reaction will also kick in from time to time. The

following strands are different pulls back to partisanship and pushes towards citizenship.

Mixed meetings in the midst of a conflict can be emotional spaces

Many meetings between people from different traditions in an ethnic frontier are filled with an emotional content that few people feel confident to acknowledge, address and move through. It is important that the staff members of public agencies have explored these dynamics themselves and draw on their own experiences to assist the people they work with to move through, and beyond, such fears so that together they can develop additional confidence and ease.

People are more than their beliefs

In a conflict, meetings between people become readily focused on the rightness or otherwise of the religious, political or cultural beliefs of people from different groups, traditions or communities. People are driven to simplify matters and are less able to meet and explore the complexity and interdependence of their daily lives. However, probation staff have to hold on to the belief that 'people are more than their beliefs' and assist wider meeting and engagement. Such meetings may need to be in 'private spaces' where nothing is attributed, as well as in carefully facilitated public spaces where issues and themes are aired because they are important for public understanding.

Separation, avoidance and politeness frustrate just and open relationships

In a conflict, individuals find it more comfortable to seek out those they think they are like and to move apart from those they see as different to them. Separation is preferred by some, and avoidance and politeness are practised by almost all. The spaces for real meetings and engagements across lines of difference are increasingly hostage to the wider fears. Those that promote relationships between people from different backgrounds and cultures are weakened and more readily isolated. In a partisan climate or culture it is difficult for a community-based worker to hold on to the belief that the primacy of right and just relationships between people is the central means through which people grow and develop. It is difficult to hold to the value base that sees people, understood to be different, as people to be at ease with and to learn from. Probation staff, working to an agency with a vision of an interdependent society, and to a court mandate premised on citizenship,

have more protection and distance from such partisan and separating processes.

Meeting together creates points of change and contrast

Public sector staff need to work to the wider vision of a more open and shared society, personally as well as institutionally. Such a practice enables people to develop a critical and reflective distance from the many subtle partisan dynamics they sometimes are held within. Spaces where previously threatening differences can be explored make Good Relations more possible between people from different religious upbringings, political opinions and racialised experiences (Eyben *et al.* 2002). For an agency such as probation, that works across and within different localities and with a variety of community organisations, such experiences assist the growth of Good Relations.

Becoming an intercultural society challenges both contested and stable societies today

Meetings where people come together from different backgrounds and cultures, across lines of distrust or silence, are often hostage to wider fears and so little new knowledge or learning about the 'other' is acquired. One function of a public body in society is to administer services to that diverse citizen base fairly and a second is to mirror that society in the body of its staff. When criminal justice bodies perform these functions well, they grow public confidence in that central law and order system.

Organisations and staff should model inclusive ways of working

Working to enable people to be at ease with difference is becoming the central challenge facing democratic societies today. Experiences of increasing polarisation and the growth of racist attacks and hate crimes demonstrate the need to promote citizenship as the primary basis for an agreed society, not communally opposed identities. Professional values of promoting equity, valuing diversity and securing interdependent relationships and structures (Eyben *et al.* 1997) for a shared society (OFMDFM 2005) are important standards to hold workers accountable to. They are reminders of the need for a 'values-led profession' (Lorenz 1994).

Promoting professional values that secure a shared society in groupwork and organisational practice

In their work with people and groups, probation staff can ensure that the boundaries around the relationship or group are fair and equitable (equity), that the space between people affirms and acknowledges them to be different (diversity) and that the growth of supportive relationships between members is an experience of interdependence and commitment to one another (interdependence). For the team leader or board member it means that each person engaged is welcome to state their views (equity), that the full abilities and experiences of the staff and board members are valued (diversity) and that the organisation's values and vision are of a shared future and an inclusive and interdependent society (interdependence).

It is to the credit of PBNi staff that they have, throughout the conflict, worked across communities and traditions and not given in to partisanship. The current Good Relations programme now invites staff teams to re-examine the extent to which there may be any tacit cultures within teams or locations that collude with partisanship and diminish a citizenship-based approach.

Moving between citizenship and partisanship: The tension for staff

Professional workers, in statutory, voluntary and community organisations, need to develop their work within an understanding that public funds and policy insists on promoting a shared and citizen-based society, not a partisan one. The task of promoting practice models based on a citizenship model rather than reinforcing assumptions that feed partisanship is a continual tension for those working to a vision of a shared society. For those workers that buy into supporting partisan traditions and work uncritically, there is little tension: they are carried within the seductive comfort of partisanship.

Separate and distinct traditions and areas do not grow overnight but are accretions over time. They are contributed to in the choices people exercise about where to live or move. In such small manners, sharing is built or diluted. In Northern Ireland an element influencing these choices, in both public housing and in private developments, is fear or distrust of those from different traditions and the perceived 'loyalty' of people living in those areas.

Separation is also fed where there is a professional unwillingness to name these hard issues of growing separation openly or to name the need

for competences in diversity management or in community relations within the wider public service. Ouseley (2001) identifies the need to examine whether public funding of community programmes explicitly encourages sharing or implicitly reinforces separation (see also Jarman *et al.* 2005).

Sustaining and supporting reflective practice

The professional worker and Good Relations practice

To meet others from a different tradition or culture is a journey of emotion, rationality and politics, especially in a contested society. Emotionally, people have to acknowledge their histories and fears as well as the stories they have been told about the 'other'. Rationally, they are forced to recognise that their behaviour in excluding groups of people in terms of identity, religion, social background, gender and all other equality grounds is no longer sustainable. Politically, they are required to renegotiate power relationships as well as to build a new society where the old, bipolar identities have to acknowledge the new diversity and interdependence agenda that is evident even in a contested space (Wilson 1994).

Good Relations: Being on the other side of vigilance

The desire for good community relations between people associated with opposed traditions in a contested society is the shadow side of the communal reality that people from different traditions are brought up with: that the 'others' are to be feared and can never be trusted. Wishing for good community relations is in fact a desire to be 'on the other side' of vigilance: in a place where the intentions and connections of the others have ceased to threaten or injure.

Many workers can give good examples of friendships across lines of supposed hostility. People use these friendships as proof that they are not among the bigoted when, in fact, they are evidence of an underlying sense of their fundamental improbability and fragility. Northern Ireland remains a country of 'innocent people, in which those who would damage community relations are always others and never us – yet somehow we end up where we are ... On the old and well-tried principles of safety first, people profess their commitment to a common future, but first construct their defence' (Morrow *et al.* 2002).

Building contrasting experiences

Good Relations work has to be about the experience of change being possible as a human reality as well as about changes in policy that, overall, drive institutions forward on the journey towards a shared future. The practice of promoting the Good Relations agenda to organisations, staff and people of all ages deals with relationships which are scarred by violence or the fear of violence. Individuals in the midst of such an ethnic frontier setting easily feel overwhelmed because the source of their fear is not an individual who can be removed, as in crime, but a whole group of people and the ideology and structure which unites and supports them.

Good personal relationships therefore always take place in the shadow of this fear which can never be fully forgotten. Good Relations work is about the development of a body of knowledge, experience and practice whereby difficult issues of violence and fear can be faced and transformed. There will be a real change when we, together, build a lasting hopefulness in children and young people and an adult society that is open to differences.

Conclusion

Good relationships between people from different backgrounds and traditions are, initially, a primary task for the state, institutions, boards, staff and adult society. A general and over-riding experience is that the staff involved need to be assured of the support for the community relations/Good Relations agenda by all levels of the policy and institutional layers they work within (Eyben *et al.* 1997). There are several priorities for such engagements.

A first priority must be to link this practice to policies, structures and programmes that deal with the wider dynamics of violence against individuals, hate crime and the securing of community safety. A citizenship-based society requires that citizens are not ambivalent about violent actions and that the law can assume unanimity of support. These are goals to work for in an ethnic frontier society, they are not 'givens'. It is in this fragile context that the Good Relations practice of the PBNI needs to be understood. If people choose to see acts of threat or violence against them as being actions by members of one tradition against all members of their tradition, the securing of an agreed legal order is weakened, as is the securing of a society founded on equal citizenship. In

such a climate, the tendency for 'tit-for-tat' actions rises to the surface and the goal of securing an agreed society is diminished.

In cultural terms, the law and order system should hold individuals to account, diminish fears growing within the wider population and erode any tendencies to retaliation and revenge. When this works, citizen-based societies are strengthened; when it fails, people more readily become partisan.

A second priority is to link the day-to-day practices of public and civic institutions to the promotion of openness and fair treatment and the need for improved community relations and Good Relations. Co-existence, at best, means an uneasy peace where no-one learns 'with the other' but most people learn about the other through the stories of the worst fears of their group. Good Relations practice is about assisting people and groups to evolve relationship structures that enable and ennoble one another; and secure the place of each different person, as of right. Promoting cross-cultural understanding and peace-building between people is, at root, not primarily about skills and problems, but about enabling and supporting open and potentially trusting relationships, underpinned by an organisational and societal culture that acknowledges the other as a 'gift' rather than a 'danger'. Work for understanding is a practical engagement that is about meeting others in ways that undermine previous 'cultural stereotypes' and 'certainties'.

A professional value base and a public service ethic reject partisanship. These value bases are identified with promoting the common good, interdependence and agreed and equal citizenship as the basis for a stable society. Partisanship, if perpetuated, ensures that future generations will be mortgaged to strife, enmity, bitterness, continuing division and limited opportunities because separate and equal is no equality at all.

A third priority is to link citizenship and Good Relations with economic sustainability. The citizenship script is essential for linking the work with people from diverse backgrounds to the wider search for the economic sustainability and future vitality of a contested region. Morrissey, an economist who since 2000 has argued the economic centrality of Good Relations, claims there is a 'new seriousness about the policy field of good relations, a moral abhorrence of the manifestations of sectarianism and racism seen across Northern Ireland and a recognition of the diseconomies and threat to development represented by a divided and segregated society' (2006, pp. 2–3). The citizenship

agenda is part of the wider challenge of promoting a diverse and interdependent future together. As more staff in public and civic organisations model such approaches, people will experience relationships and spaces that model ease and open enquiry that they can be mimetic with (Girard 1977; Girard 1978) and so become interdependent with others.

At the centre of probation practice is the belief that people can change their violent and criminal behaviours and that people have to be held to account when they disturb societal Good Relations. Clients on probation need to be with professional staff who can speak about how they, themselves, are open to living with those different to them and face the challenges of being partisan. Real change means that the state has to examine the ways in which law and order works in the society; how equality of access for people from different backgrounds or cultures operates and whether equality of employment opportunities are safeguarded. Organisational cultures have to examine how they need to change to speak about 'others' in an inclusive way and to change how differences are acknowledged and addressed in their work. It is now time to invite people in political life, civic life, faith organisations, trade unions and public life to show 'civic courage' (Shriver 2005) and build civic-minded organisations and public institutions that establish Good Relations between our diverse citizens as a necessity.

In promoting a Good Relations agenda, the PBNI supports work towards a more secure and citizen-based society. In the midst of insecurities around difference that are emerging as one element of societal life in more stable societies in the Republic of Ireland and Britain, the evolving practice within the PBNI has learning within it to assist probation services to hold to wider intercultural values. Its work towards a shared future for different and equal citizens is something that all societies now need to accumulate and learn from.

Sondhi (2006) argues that the intercultural approach facilitates dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different backgrounds. He sees encounter between equal, yet different, citizens as a key activity. When the PBNI promotes Good Relations practice between board members and with the staff body, and supports staff promoting this theme with clients and partners, it establishes the experience of equal and different citizenship as a primary point of engagement for all staff. Such practice links Good Relations in Northern Ireland with the practice of promoting wider intercultural understanding

throughout the EU. In such ways, this work enables Northern Ireland to become an outward-looking and forward-looking region,¹ a place with institutional experiences that organisations in more stable societies facing the intercultural challenge can learn from.

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