

Summary Report

Fostering Cross-Cultural Understanding for Building Peaceful and Inclusive Societies

*A Thematic Debate convened by the President of the General Assembly,
in collaboration with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations*

22 March 2012

Introduction

This report summarizes the one-day thematic debate held on 22 March 2012, at the initiative of the President of the General Assembly, His Excellency Mr. Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, in collaboration with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. The report reflects the thoughts and experiences shared by participants and eminent speakers, including Her Excellency Dr. Asha-Rose Migiro, *United Nations Deputy Secretary-General*, His Excellency Mr. Beşir Atalay, *Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey*, His Excellency Mr. Gonzalo de Benito, *Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain*, and His Excellency Mr. Jorge Sampaio, *High Representative of the UN Alliance of Civilizations*.

The purpose of the debate was to consider how to facilitate cross-cultural understanding, which is central to building peaceful and inclusive societies. The debate laid particular emphasis on the contribution of youth. Although, thanks to new communications technology, we seem closer than ever to one another, the debate showed that in reality we are increasingly in need of bridge building, to foster greater mutual knowledge and understanding. In this regard, youth can play a significant role. Thanks to young people's energy, ingenuity and idealism, added to governments' and civil society's commitment, our diversity can - and should - be celebrated as a path to our common destiny. This should be the vision of a reinvigorated Alliance of Civilizations.

Panel One: Cross-Cultural Understanding for Peace and Development — What Works?

People everywhere are bound by a shared humanity and a common quest for prosperity, stability and peaceful coexistence. Yet, translating the broad goal of better understanding and cooperation into concrete action can be daunting. Members of the first panel addressed various aspects of this challenge. They first explored the new situation created by populations' increasing communication through an ever-broadening choice of technologies. Until recently, many people lived in self-contained societies without much interaction with other parts of the world. Today, opportunities for interaction are exploding. Yet, several panelists observed, it is doubtful whether the recent growth in the flow of information has meant more understanding. Some insisted that information had been used to influence some and to impose stereotypes on others. More generally, it was questioned whether new communication technologies are producing and transmitting shared values.

In fact, it was argued, there is often resistance to cross-cultural dialogue, based on the fear of losing one's identity and integrity. There is still a long way for most of us to recognize the reality of different cultural, religious and political identities and not to allow them to be an obstacle to reaching out to one another. The ability to deal constructively with diversity, it was stressed, is a learning process and must be developed in a proactive way.

The fear of losing one's identity and the lack of confidence among some cultural groups, as obstacles to dialogue, were also mentioned. The question was asked whether a concept of modernity is needed to address the sense of anxiety or fear that some groups have. It was noted that cultural insecurity is exploited by extremist groups. Yet, diversity itself is not the issue. Rather, problems occur when diversity hardens into certain stereotypical perspectives — something many politicians promote for political gain.

Humankind must build bridges that are strong enough to carry the weight of our differences. That process requires a sense of common history and perspective. Everyone must accept that others have a story to tell and everyone should make the effort to listen to that story as part of the general narrative.

The debate also pointed to a growing realization that a common ethical framework is needed. This is notably the case against the backdrop of globalization and some of the adverse consequences it has produced in recent decades. The ethics of justice and democracy played a significant role in the Arab Awakening. In response to questions from the audience about universal values, the panelists notably referred to human dignity and universal human rights, with a particular insistence on justice for all, irrespective of religion. In fact, recognizing shared values is generally easier than finding a common vocabulary for a dialogue within or between communities. The idea of a common heritage shared by all civilizations, irrespective of geography or race, was important, as was the role of the media, educational institutions and general histories.

For many countries comprised of several ethnic groups, emphasizing diversity starts at home and calls for a healthy sense of national belonging, common heritage, shared vision for the future, and what needs to be done for those who are still marginalized. As a result, public opinion and the media tend to focus more on commonality than on negative differences. Such positive developments may be a source of inspiration, when it comes to fostering cross-cultural understanding in a variety of other contexts.

The first panel ended with remarks from the audience about multiculturalism in Europe, the crucial role of schools and textbooks in their portrayal of "the other", and the demand from teachers for revised course curricula and educational materials in order to teach tolerance, respect and cultural diversity to their students.

Panel Two: “Youth as Partners in Advancing Cross-cultural Understanding — Best Practices and Challenges”

There is no doubt that supporting young peoples’ participation in efforts to advance cross-cultural understanding benefits society as a whole. Yet, much remains to be done to ensure meaningful youth participation in mainstream governmental work focusing on cross-cultural understanding.

Today’s world is creating new opportunities for young people to discover who they really are, to engage and to work together. In some instances, authoritarian regimes and the lack of communication tools had been obstacles on that road. Political change has released voices and energies. Social media outlets, such as Twitter and Facebook, are offering new platforms to engage and inform young people. More “free and responsible” young people and women are able to express themselves than ever before. Young people are also more aware of global problems; indeed, they are realizing that “plutocracy can no longer represent the world” and they will not be silent anymore.

Against the backdrop of this positive evolution, much more work is needed to involve youth at the grass-roots level. It is “high time” for Governments to achieve that goal, including by building on the promising platform of civil society involvement. Governments must invest in youth, calling on them to consider the type of country they wish to see evolve. Democratic institutions must be strengthened and more attention must be devoted by governments to young people. Entities to promote youth participation must be created within Governments, and must be backed up with social support. At the same time, new toolkits are needed to boost the capacity of youth organizations. The United Nations itself must also adapt to these changes. Listening to young people will help strengthen the United Nations. The upcoming appointment of the first Special Adviser on Youth was hailed as a clear signal that the United Nations is moving youth and cross-cultural understanding to the forefront of its agenda.

During the interactive part of the debate, several examples were given of measures and reforms designed to introduce youth voices in important political and social decision-making processes. In one instance, national youth councils had been established and youth did, in fact, participate in decision-making. Some parliamentarians also belonged to the “youth” demographic. Other mechanisms and procedures for the participation of youth were mentioned, including in the EU and UN context.

Shaping political processes is an important vehicle for young people to foster cross-cultural understanding. Young people also successfully leverage music and the arts to bring people closer together. The creation of the No Borders Orchestra with participants from the former Yugoslavia countries is an outstanding example. Such initiatives have a great potential in that respect. The making of short videos by young people on issues of diversity and integration, in the context of the Alliance of Civilizations’ Plural + Program, is another example of mobilizing the arts for dialogue and cross-cultural action.

The involvement of youth in media as a way to address the challenges they faced was also briefly discussed. While the role of media could not be overemphasized, it was stressed that

media vehicles often do not view the good work of young people as “news”. There is often a need to create special programs and opportunities, if the voice of youth is to be heard at all.

Youth involvement in human rights promotion is another avenue for building peaceful and inclusive societies. NGO experience underscores the usefulness of bringing youth from different backgrounds together to talk about human rights: some agreement is very likely to develop on this issue, which can be brought to the attention of the authorities and lead to recommendations for action. Yet, significant progress in that area would depend on easier access to information on human rights records and improved human rights learning.

It was hoped that the soon-to-be appointed Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Youth will be able to advance the participation of youth in cross-cultural understanding.