

# **Diaspora identity and citizenship, Building civic society in**

## **Religious pluralism focusing on**

### **Muslim communities.**

#### **"Preliminary thoughts"**

**Common Dream Conference, Sydney, 16-19/08/07**

#### **Introduction:**

The relationship between Diaspora identity and citizenship is a critical area of intellectual work for many scholars and researchers as well as being critical to the work of civil society groups and human rights organizations. The main focus for analysis and action in the past has been; the best policies, approaches and mechanisms to successfully, include and integrate Diaspora communities and their people within the nation state and into the structures and processes of main stream society, equal and accountable citizens.

In recent years, it has been found that governmental policies, procedures and regulations are not sufficient to guarantee a successful integration process and the active participation of various ethnic and religious groups within the public sphere. Accordingly, the active involvement of civil society organizations is suggested as being critical at the local, regional and national levels. This involvement at its best, includes an active, integrated, coherent, comprehensive and synergetic strategy, with this strategy including advocacy and community development activities. Actually, the

involvement of civil society in this process is mandatory if the declared objective of building a viable and vibrant civic society is to be achieved. To re-iterate this; without the involvement of civil society, a viable and vibrant civic society cannot be achieved.

In standard literature, the governments have been held responsible for being inefficient in integrating the religious and ethnic groups within the social mainstream and the national state. In other situations it has been noted that some minority groups may also be hesitant and in certain situations unwilling, to fully integrate into the nation state, instead preferring to keep a distance and social space between themselves and the mainstream, seeing this as the space through which they can preserve, maintain and protect their identity.

The distinction between these two perspectives is crucial to understanding the relationship between identity and citizenship on the strategic levels, and for developing action plans to facilitate and accelerate Diaspora integration processes. However, the inclusion of the Diaspora communities and citizenship process is a collective social responsibility and is achieved through the collective efforts of the various stakeholders. It is not the sole responsibility of the national governments, as is not the sole responsibility of the civil society organizations.

We all know that the issue of relationship between identity and citizenship is an old-new domain and has been a main concern of the national governments and civil society organizations for a long period!

In this context, an important question arises as to whether there are any new external and internal factors, either regional or global that inspire the officials, researchers, practitioners and activists to provide more attention and resources to focus more on the relationship between identity and citizenship as an urgent issue and within the dynamics of civil society building process? My answer to this question is **YES** and specifically because of the increasing influence of Islamic communities in Western societies and the emerging of what is in many areas, a high tension relationship between Muslims in general and the West after the tragic events of September 11 and the political, social and security aftermath. In my opinion, the integration of Islamic communities into their new relevant societies will not be an easy process within the prevailing highly polarized ideological and political context and; this integration requires creative approaches, strategies and tools. In this context, interfaith dialogue should be considered as one of these new approaches with the needing to be expanded and more clearly articulated.

The above mentioned academic assumption of the "integration complexity" of certain orthodox Islamic groups becomes a source of concern, confusion and tension between the nation state and Islamic groups. This occurrence is not limited to Western countries. It is also happening in the Arab World. This concern also stems from the fact that local Islamic communities are increasingly supporting radical or highly orthodox – depending on one's perspective - groups. The sense of not belonging and of exclusion of these Islamic communities from the public sphere is becoming unfortunately, a larger and more widespread problem that needs urgent and effective action on the part of the national government and most importantly I believe, urgent and effective action on the level of civil society organisations, including faith-based

organisations. In this, the pressing question becomes: Are civil society organizations, including the faith based organizations, willing to, and with willingness, do they have the capacity to play a leading role in this process, devoting more resources and using more effective community based approaches and strategies? Indeed this is a joint responsibility and challenge facing all the stakeholders including government, private, community and religious sectors. Let us assume, for the sake of argument that the vision of the various stakeholders; the government, the private sector, civil society organizations and local religious communities, **is to guarantee an active political, social, economic and cultural participation of the Diaspora communities, in the public sphere and according to agreed upon and shared values and governance system.** If this is the objective, what are the main strategic challenges facing this vision and purpose?

## **Strategic challenges to build vibrant civic society that is openly and productively religiously pluralist:**

### **1. THE FIRST CHALLENGE**

#### **The cultural and religious differences between the Diaspora communities and the hosting society;**

These differences vary from religion to religion and between ethnic groups. Differences include values, beliefs, perspectives, traditions, norms and life style. In the case of Islamic Diaspora, the problem is more complicated as Islam is a religion and a way of life. It combines the religion and politics and does not differentiate between religion and governance. It did not witness any internal religious reform separating religion from state , where what for Caesar is for

Caesar and what is for God is for God. This profoundly important concept of Islam creates confusion within Muslim communities within Western countries, as on certain occasions, Muslims find their beliefs and actions in confrontation with the laws in the hosting country. Some examples of this are: actions with regard to banking and finance Law and Family Law.

Islam rejects secularism, in principle. This sort of rejection can lead to major obstacles in the integration process. According to some Islamic political and religious schools, Muslims should live in an Islamic society, and if they are not able to change the society and the political system to be more in accordance with Islam, they should at least to protect themselves from any external negative ideological influences. These ideological constraints prevent many Muslims from active participation in mainstream society. Ideological constraints become a legitimate and divine invitation for isolation and separation from the other parts of the society. Within these kinds of religiously and socially separatist groups, the continuous belief of belonging primarily to another world and nation has weakened and continues to weaken the possibilities for full citizenship and social participation. I make it clear that this belief does not necessarily govern the majority of Muslim communities living in Western countries where there are many Muslims who heavily involved in their hosting societies and playing a significant role in building their hosting countries and at the same time respecting their beliefs and traditions. Different contexts and dynamics alter the reality, so that the model of beneficial separatism presented by radical or highly orthodox groups, is not always the dominating model. However where it is present, it brings specific and very challenging difficulties.

Based on the above-mentioned challenge, there is a strong **need** for the Diaspora Islamic community to rethink its religious and ideological constraints and references and establish leadership that is genuinely respectful. A new and emerging leadership should take into consideration the actual needs and interests of their constituencies through constructive and meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders and societal groups. Such a dialogue should specifically intend to lead to full participation of the Diaspora communities in the nation building process and the construction of the final identity of the various relevant hosting countries taking into consideration the real differences among the various Diaspora groups. In addition, leadership should encourage and educate its constituencies to abandon the possibility of violence and to consciously separate themselves from fundamentalists and extremists who tend to use Islam for political activities.

2. The second challenge is the stereotypical imaging and perceptions within Western societies towards Muslims and Islam. According to these stereotypes, Muslims are perceived as backward, uncivilized, extremely conservative, violent, etcetera. Unfortunately, these perceptions do not differentiate between Islam and Muslims on one hand and Islamic fundamentalists and those inclined to violence on the other. This perception either on the governmental level or on the local community level has been strengthened after the terrorist attack on September 11 and has had profound consequences for the respect for human rights. Muslims in general have been accused of extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism. These stereotypical perceptions and actions have pushed moderate Muslims to the edge, forcing them to feel obliged to

defend themselves and their religion. In a negative atmosphere, moderate Muslims are struggling in encouraging Islamic communities to participate in the public sphere and civic life. This negative atmosphere of criticism, suspicion and stereotyping has given encouragement to radical groups, to recruit and mobilise Islamic community members towards extremism and unfortunately including youth.

These stereotyping actions and attitudes have become in some places, institutionalized discrimination practices including restriction to mobility, restriction to basic personal liberties such as wearing hijab, the veil, the distortion of the Muslim image in the media and on certain occasions, direct attacks on Islam and Muslims. This sort of religious and polarization has placed many moderate Muslims in a situation dominated by feelings and perceptions of insult, fear, exclusion and inequity and inequity with other citizens. Fearful and monitored Muslims are not able to promote citizenship, will not be able to integrate, and will not be able to participate in the nation building process.

There is a an urgent **need** to lobby governments to continue respecting fully, human rights concepts and instruments and to educate the public at the same time of human rights instruments and to advocate that the media play a positive role within the currently polarized situation.

There is an urgent **need** to create an enabling environment to support moderate Muslims enable them to confront the negative and destructive influence of the extreme groups and the fundamentalists within the Diaspora Islamic

communities in general and with youth and new generations in particular. There is also **a need** to show other enlightened aspects of Islamic life and to stop concentrating on one aspect of it i.e. backwardness and conservativeness.

3. The third obstacle is the lack of visionary and competent leadership and sound and vibrant institutions within the Islamic communities in the Western countries. This leadership is fragmented, tribal, factionalized, individualistic and so competitive. Unfortunately, the Diaspora communities have not been able to build competent, accountable, transparent, democratic and professional organizations serving the sole interest of their constituencies and local communities. Unfortunately, these organizations have not been successful in managing the transition from relief to community development and from being traditional and tribal to becoming advanced and modern organizations. Predominantly, they have not acted as agents for change nor represented the interests of their local communities efficiently. I refer here in particular to the role of enhancing the participation of the local communities in political, social and economic life, and the role of enhancing tolerance and understanding with other communities.

Moreover, the professional and technical capacity of these organizations is generally limited to very few human and financial resources. It is also worth mentioning that coordination and networking among these organizations is minimal, and networking and coordination between Islamic and other organizations including other faith-based organizations is still weak. In

general, the cooperation between the Diaspora organizations and other civil society organizations in the hosting countries is still modest.

There is a special **need** to strengthen and empower these organizations to actively and efficiently, represent the interests of their related communities and to respond effectively to their wider needs. In addition, it is essential to encourage the emergence of enlightened leadership for the Diaspora Islamic communities, particularly the youth. Moreover, the existing leadership needs to strengthen its ties and linkages with its affiliated local communities and to avoid an elitist or hierarchical style of leadership.

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4. The fourth challenge in encouraging local Diaspora participation in the public sphere is: The capacity, efficiency and willingness of the national governments to develop appropriate democratic inclusion policies to respond adequately to the various needs, aspirations and interests of the different society groups. These policies should be based and take into consideration the universal and universalising principles and practises of a human rights framework as guiding principles, shaped around the special needs of the identity and beliefs of the various Diaspora groups. Such policies must be clearly reflected in the various aspects of the legal, educational and service delivery system. Additionally, and this is where civil society and faith-based organisations have a critical role to play, in addition to government responsibility to develop and implement appropriate inclusion policies, it is the role of civil society organizations to assist in the development, implementation and monitoring of such policies. There is an urgent **need** to

for national governments to develop and implement a policy package to support and empower the Diaspora groups. There is also **a need** establish a strong coordination systems between the governments and the CSOs to implement these polices and to deliver quantitative and qualitatively measured economic and social services to these communities.

**Proposed strategies to assist in building civic society in religious pluralism:**

I suggest adopting and implementing a coherent, comprehensive and integrated strategy to overcome the above challenges and assist in promoting citizenship and civil society norms and practises in a religious pluralism:

**1. POLICY DEVELOPMENT, POLICY ANALYSIS AND POLICY DISSEMINATION; CONDUCTING AN ACTIVE ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS**

Civil society organizations have a social mandate and the capacity to assist national governments in developing and implementing appropriate democratic inclusion polices responding to the various needs, aspirations and interests of the various Diaspora groups. As mentioned before, these policies should be based on the human rights principles and respond adequately to the actual needs and interests of the Diaspora groups. In addition, and within a transformative and

socially empowering advocacy strategy, the CSOs should play an active role in influencing and monitoring governmental policies to guarantee proper implementation of these policies. And more than this, the CSOs should play an active role in promoting and guaranteeing the political economic, social, cultural and religious rights of the Diaspora groups, advocating for "the rights based approach", lobbying governments and representatives to translate these rights into actual legislation.

This strategy suggests that CSOs to establish strong and developing relationship and linkages with their most relevant communities to identify their needs and rights and mobilise them for these rights and needs. It is obvious, in this context, that constituency building and reaching the public is an important element of any successful advocacy program. It is worth mentioning that developing and implementing an effective media strategy and media-responsive activities is essential to assist the CSOs in their campaign to influence public citizenship and integration policies. It is understood that a successful advocacy strategy requires close networking and coordination with the various stakeholders to guarantee a successful implementation and effective influence of the inclusion policies. Finally, the assessing and measuring of the impact of these policies on Diaspora groups is crucial, in order to measure sustainable change.

## **2. AWARENESS BUILDING AND CONSCIOUSNESS BUILDING STRATEGY**

The objective of this is to deepen the discussion and work on building a clearly articulated conceptual framework of the core issues related to Diaspora identity and citizenship within a multicultural society and religious pluralism. The outcome of this process is to identify the core issues, build an agenda for dialogue among the various stakeholders, circulate the conclusions, and finally agree on joint actions to promote active citizenship and more involvement of the Diaspora in the public sphere as equal partners and citizens. It also aims to promote and educate the public regarding human rights principles and instruments in order to reach tolerance and understanding among various groups within society. It also aims to change perceptions and images of the various societal and religious groups towards each other and to establish a strong consultative process and communication channels among them.

Interfaith dialogue is an effective and well-recognized approach and instrument to enhance and promote understanding and tolerance among various religions. I believe that interfaith dialogue, in spite of its current limitations and currently restricted mandate, can still with these restrictions, play a crucial role in enhancing citizenship and assisting in a successful integration of the various groups within the national state. However in order to play a fuller and more transformative role, inter-faith dialogue needs to expand its own self-understanding, mandate and agenda to tackle wider political and public issues that require involvement in joint actions and ventures with other community-based and human rights organizations. Inter-faith dialogue should, also, focus on tackling the problems facing isolated religious groups and seeking realistic and practical solutions to the real problems of religious isolation and isolationism. Exploration of issues of doctrine are useful on conceptual and theoretical levels but have less impact on the practical level. It is to be expected that

faith-based organizations, grounded within a position of moral and religious authority and social influence, to play an active and leading role in educating and empowering the local Diaspora communities, not only through relief and doctrinally orientated programs such as religious education,, but through an hands-on involvement in the actual problems of the local communities. Faith based organizations, according to the UN classification, are an integral part of the civil society sector and they are expected to participate in the actual dynamics of building the civil society.

### **3. EXPANDING THE INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY OF THE CSO's**

Capacity building programs aim to strengthen the CSO's and CBO's and enable them to serve the interests and needs of their constituencies and assist them to become good citizens within a broader vision of building a vibrant and viable civic society.

As mentioned previously, CSO's should have the interest, mandate and capacity to work intensively in the enhancement of the citizenship of the Diaspora communities and groups. It was also mentioned that CSOs should be heavily involved in the development of the policies of inclusion and the business of promoting human rights principles and instruments through various community and media activities. This expanded mandate requires strong and competent organizations. Basing my perspective on my experience, I believe that in the current environment, many advocacy and community development organizations who are working with Diaspora communities lack the capacity to implement genuine and successful community development programs. Additionally, advocacy organizations working in the area of

development and implementation of inclusion policies are not strong and do not possess the necessary skills to implement successful advocacy campaigns. I refer in this context, to the Islamic CSO's that are active within Islamic communities but that lack the required managerial, human and financial resources to play a leading role in enhancing the citizenship issue and facilitating the full integration of their affiliated communities in the domain of the nation state. The notion of capacity building also includes the creation and embellishment of other CSO's according to the needs of the local Diaspora communities. Accordingly, if there is a lack of organisations capable of enhancing the issue of identity and citizenship, a process should be established to create new organizations to serve this purpose and mandate.

#### **4. DELIVER ADEQUATE AND QUALITATIVE SERVICES TO THE DIASPORA COMMUNITIES**

Responding to the various basic social and economic needs of the Diaspora communities is crucial to guaranteeing successful inclusion of these communities in the public sphere. Although providing services is traditionally the main responsibility of the national government and the role of CSO's is complementary, to more substantially advocate for these services, it is the responsibility of the CSO's to implement service provision programs directly within the local communities. In certain remote geographical areas where governments are not able to deliver sufficient services, CSOs should reach these areas and deliver these services. In circumstances where the government is not able or not willing to deliver certain types of services, CSO's should provide these services. More than this, the mode of operation and the approach of delivering services by the CSO's is usually different to the service

delivery models used by government. CSO's use more participatory approaches in the delivery of services intended to empower local communities and involve them in the whole process from Needs Assessments to Evaluation and Reporting. This process of equal partnership increases the ownership of delivered programs, increasing their sustainability and impact. Therefore, the service delivery programs implemented by CSO's aim to empower Diaspora communities and increase their socially participatory experience of what citizenship might be. The style and process of service delivery creates a set of civilised norms and values such as teamwork, participation and ownership amongst others.

## **5. CONSULTATIONS, COORDINATION, NETWORKING AND COOPERATION STRATEGY**

Increasing cooperation and coordination among various stakeholders is essential to maximising the impact of the developmental and advocacy programs aiming to enhance citizenship and civil society building process. This coordination and networking process includes systematic, regular and institutionalized consultative processes between the different parties, including the CSO's and national governments. In this context, the cooperation between religious organizations and community based organisations is crucial within the issue of identities and citizenship as the area clearly incorporates central political and religious components. Coordination and cooperation among the various groups may cover different areas such as the development of inclusion policies, launching advocacy and community development programs, in addition to capacity building programs. In order for coordination among the various parties to succeed, it should be based on a vision of

jointly developed and implemented plans Vis avis the issue of identity and citizenship.

### **Conclusion:**

It is possible and feasible to reconcile Diaspora specific identities and good citizenship with active participation in the public sphere and nation building processes and structures. The prerequisites for this dynamic process are two fold:

- Institutional consultative processes and close coordination between the Diaspora communities on one hand and the public sector, religious sector, civil society sector and the private sector on the other. Coordination should be based on shared vision and well-coordinated plans.
- The emergence of visionary, enlightened and competent leadership within the Diaspora communities aiming to serve the interests of their affiliated local communities and respond efficiently to their needs and priorities.

In this context, interfaith dialogue is very important and influential mechanism in promoting reconciliation, tolerance and understanding between various religious traditions. Interfaith dialogue is central to the building of vibrant and viable civil society if it adopts and implement an expanded agenda, to include specific actions and processes, including the enactment of human rights principles and instruments for example, and with this, strengthening cooperation with other civil society organizations.

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Canberra, 16/08/07