

Is cultural diversity an illusion?

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Last week, I had the opportunity to be a member of a panel on a PTV World programme to mark the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, which has been marked every year on 21 May since 2005. I was glad to talk about the importance of cultural diversity, multiculturalism, tolerance and exchange of knowledge on a more level playing field than what is often the case. It is harmonious people do best in this world; they are more creative, innovative and productive.

After the programme, I reflected critically about what I and my colleague Virginija Morgan from Lithuania, had managed to say, answering questions posed by the anchor Maha Makhdum. I came to realize that ‘cultural diversity and dialogue’ are more complicated concepts than I had thought before, especially if we want to see deeper change and real tolerance. Whereas we may think we are becoming more open to diversity in fields of gender, ethnicity, language, cultural and religious traditions, social and political opinions, and more, we may at the same time be less open and more intolerant, without noticing it. Perhaps we are open to diversity as long as ‘the others’ accept what we think, but may not be as open if we are challenged? It is important that we dig a bit deeper than what we can do in superficial and fast talk shows. Schools, NGO, the media, and so on, have important jobs to do, and all kinds of youth organizations and community centres.

Then, little by little, we may become a more open to ‘the others’, to diversity, and we may even change own opinions and attitudes. Yet, we must always remember that it is easier to be open at a distance and more difficult if it requires direct action from ourselves. We often want to believe that it was before that people were narrow-minded and intolerant, and if we live in a city, we may think that people in remote rural villages are lagging behind, and so on.

Yes, we all like our own image to be politically correct. In the cities we are particularly good at it; and it is in the cities that the loudspeakers are highest; that is where the young, beautiful, successful, well-educated, and powerful, live. They can afford to be open to minorities, too, because it doesn’t threaten their culture and style.

Yet, most of the time, I believe that we become more and more standardized, more and more ‘A-4 size’, to use a word from bureaucracy. It is the opinion leaders and the strong who define what is politically and socially correct and what we all should say and do, perhaps even think – although the latter nobody knows. We may not even know our own attitudes until situations arise and we have to make decisions. We may be surprised, disappointed or impressed, at ourselves.

Cultural diversity does often mean that we have to change own opinions, and the basis is that learn to accept who we are. Then we can understand others better. It means that we exchange views and have dialogue on a horizontal level playing field, not a vertical field, where the majority always wins. Often, it also means giving voice to the voiceless and see those who a downtrodden. It means bringing out values, ideas and experiences of people who are different and in minority. But we must also realize that the majority, the mainstream and politically correct, are not necessarily wrong either. But they have resources to fend for themselves; it is the minorities that need our support.

Being a Scandinavian from a majority background, I often think of the Sami people who are indeed just a tiny minority today. But the Sami are the indigenous Norwegians, Swedes, Finns and Russians in what we today call 'Nordkalotten'. They are only a few hundred thousand. Interestingly, more and more admit they are of Sami background, and their culture and political rights have never been as highly recognized as today. The cross-border Sami Council meets and decides on issues of special importance to the Sami people, and it advises the majority society on other issues.

Recently, it was heartwarming to see that a Swedish Sami singer could reach the national finals in the mainstream popular Eurovision Song Contest. Jon Henrik Fjellgren got silver medal for his Sami 'joik' in Sweden, but another artist with a mainstream melody received the nomination and took part in the all-Europe competition in Austria last weekend – and he won. That was also heartwarming because the Swedes are just ten million people out of half a billion or so Europeans. Måns Zelmerlöw was a confident winner from a little land.

In Pakistan, there are many ethnic and language groups, from central and remote mountains and hills, valleys and plains, towns, villages and scattered settlements. In addition to the dominant Sunni Muslims, there are various religious denominations within Islam, Christianity and other religions. The land is vast and diverse and all people should be given equal respect, even if we disagree with them, and we advocate own belief and values. Not all belong to the Sindhi or Punjabi political elites either or, the elites of the other provinces and districts. Few belong to the upper-middle class but they rule Pakistan. In the political and social sphere, we need a more diverse representation. We need to revisit the role and function of the feudal lords, political families, industrialists, and others who control processes and decisions that should be more democratic and inclusive.

Cultural diversity is not about politics, some would say. But it is, too, if we want to see marginalized groups included in the mainstream society, or given a faire share and equal rights to live the way they want, and have better control over their natural resources and development in their areas. It is political activism, sometimes militant ones, and formal political processes that lead to improved rights and recognition for minority groups. And, it is also a fact that the majority society must give for the minorities to be able to receive the rights they deserve – and then all can live better together.

It was useful for me to attend the PTV World programme. It was educational, prompting me to go and do more home work or, as young people would say today, go and Google on Internet. I hope that the viewers, too, got inspired to do the same, and to discuss with friends they agreed or disagree with. At best, that is what a TV programme on the World Day for Cultural Diversity can lead to – or a newspaper column. It can contribute a tiny bit to cultural diversity becoming less of an illusion than what it is today.

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