

The Role of Self-Organisations of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in the Local Authority

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PREPARATORY DOCUMENT

Foreword

This preparatory document gives background information for the ELAINE workshop on The Role Organisations of Ethnic Minorities and Migrants in the Local Authority (Amadora, 22-24 May 1997). This document is the basis for further information exchange, presentations, and discussion during the workshop.

The first chapter gives an overview of the role of self-organisations in Europe, the way local authorities perceive their role, and the extent to which they involve them in their ethnic minority policies.

In the second chapter the city of Amadora describes the role that self-organisations play in the municipality.

In chapter three the results of the questionnaires as well as the project fiches will be summarised.

1. Introduction

The rise of self-organisations

Throughout Europe migrants and ethnic minorities have established a wide variety of organisations designed to promote common aims and interests. It is obvious that the number of self-organisations has steadily increased during the last decades. Although migrants and ethnic minorities tend to organise themselves virtually everywhere they have settled, they play actually very diverging roles.

Whereas the phenomenon of self-organisations is by no means new, the way their role is being perceived by local authorities is changing. In the last years there seems to be increasing agreement that, under certain conditions, migrants and their organisations should play an explicit role in the local authority's ethnic minority policies.¹ Therefore, more and more cities are explicitly involving self-organisation as agents in their ethnic minority policies.

Typology and role of self-organisations

Self-organisations can be broadly defined as 'organisations that are established for and by ethnic minorities and migrants'. Self-organisations vary in nature and size to a high degree. Nevertheless, a rough distinction can be made between organisations with general social and cultural activities (including sports); religious organisations; political organisations or trade unions; and organisations offering education, training and information to their members. The goals of self-organisations are manifold, but two main goals can be discerned: identity-maintenance and interest-representation.² Some self-organisations concentrate on one of these goals, but most are involved in both kinds of work.³

Membership of some of these groups is restricted to people from a particular ethnic, national, social, political, religious or gender background, others are open for several groups. In some cases membership is open for ethnic minorities as well as autochthonous people. The size of self-organisations varies from small local groups to large officially recognised bodies. The vast majority of the self-organisations is active on local level.

Positive and negative tendencies of self-organisation

There is still major disagreement on the question how and to what extent self-organisations should be involved in ethnic minority policies, and to what extent they should be actively supported. In this context, an important and controversial

¹ 6th Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Migration Affairs (1996), *A Review of the Implementation of Community Relation Policies*.

² Rex, J.; Joly, D.; Wipert, C. (1987), *Immigrant Associations in Europe*. Aldershot: Gower

³ Council of Europe (1991), *Community and Ethnic Relations in Europe*.

consideration is whether to perceive the increasing role of self-organisations as a positive or a negative trend.

The increase in the number of self-organisations does not necessarily mark a positive trend. One can argue that this development has been caused by negative tendencies, such as isolation, discrimination, and social deprivation, through which ethnic minorities tend to fall back on their own group.⁴ Self-organisations can play a conservative role, in emphasising their own culture, language etc., by which isolation can be sustained or even reinforced. It has been argued that the high degree of dispersion, which is often characteristic of self-organisations, would reflect the dissension rather than the unity among ethnic minority communities. So, according to this point of view, the role of 'self-oriented' self-organisations should not be accentuated.

On the other hand this development might also be explained by increasing involvement in society, a clear sign that immigrants are becoming actors in society, rather than mere objects.⁵ Self-organisation and mutual support can contribute to group-emancipation. Furthermore, self-organisations could play a positive role in strengthening self-identity, self-esteem, group-cohesion, and their position in society as a whole. For instance, by stimulating education and training migrants and ethnic minorities may eventually have better access to the labour market. Some argue that feeling secure in one's own culture is an important premise for meeting the receiving country's culture and society.⁶

In reality, both negative and positive tendencies appear to be valid: they are two sides of the same coin. The actual situation depends at least partially on the characteristics of the organisations themselves: Some are clearly much more integration-oriented than others.⁷

Current trends in policies towards self-organisations

On European level there seems to be general agreement on the fact that national governments may not hinder self-organisations in their activities. The European Council further stipulates the right of foreign residents to join associations and to set up consultative bodies.⁸ The 6th Conference of European Ministers Responsible for

⁴ Local Authority of Deventer, NL (1997), *Deventer: Vitaal en Kleurrijk. Discussienota Minderhedenbeleid*

⁵ See footnote 3

⁶ Skjortnes, M; Karlsen, J.E. (1993), *Coping and Qualifying, Action Programme for Improved Integration of Refugees and Immigrants in the Municipality of Stavanger*. Stavanger: Municipality of Stavanger.

⁷ Pauwels, K.; Deschamps, L. (1991), *Eigen Organisaties van Migranten*. Brussels: Centrum voor Bevolkings- en Gezinsstudien.

⁸ European Council (1992), *European Council Convention on Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level*; Article 3 & 9. The freedom of association has been laid down in Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Migration Affairs has recently stated that it is necessary to the success of policies for migrants to participate at all stages, including project management.⁹ In this respect, self-organisations are assigned an important role.

Notwithstanding this general European trend, the difference in approach between the various countries is remarkable. Some governments, mainly in northern European countries, stimulate or even oblige local authorities to consult ethnic minority self-organisations in policy areas that affect them. However, such regulation or legislation only exists in a limited number of countries, and relates mainly to political participation. In practice, therefore, it is mostly the responsibility of the local authorities to determine the role of self-organisations. Given the high degree of differentiation, it is not possible to discern clear differences between European countries.

The role of many self-organisations is for the greater part restricted to social, cultural or religious activities, primarily meant for their own members. In some cases they receive (financial) support from the local authority or other institutions, but are not directly involved in the local authority's ethnic minority policies. This more or less *passive role* still represents the majority of cases.

However, it is clear that more and more cities are looking for ways to involve self-organisations explicitly in their policies. Main reason for doing so is that they are generally supposed to have better access to the target groups and means to mobilise them. Their involvement is increasingly considered as one of the most important preconditions for success of ethnic minority policies. This *participatory approach* appears to be especially fruitful in project implementation, and is gaining ground in most European countries. Research has affirmed that 'mixed' projects involving self-organisations as well as other organisations and the local authority are in most cases quite successful.¹⁰

There are many ways in which this participation of self-organisations can be pursued. There exist forms of co-operation in which the local authority primarily uses the self-organisations to achieve better communication with target groups, to learn the ethnic minorities' needs and opinions, to disseminate information, and to provide services. Self-organisations can also be one of the partners in a project. In some cases they act even as project leaders and initiate projects and services themselves. Finally, throughout Europe many cities have established consultative councils for ethnic minorities and migrants, in which self-organisations are often also represented, or special bodies like an 'associations forum'.

⁹ 6th Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Migration Affairs (1996), *Integration of Immigrants: Towards Equal Opportunities*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe

¹⁰ Verweij, A.O. (1995), *Met Kans van Slagen? 'Eigen' Organisaties en Projecten voor Allochtone Jongeren*. Rotterdam: Instituut voor Sociologisch-Economisch Onderzoek.

Future trends and points for discussion

Although there is now a more or less general recognition that existing self-organisations should play a role in the local authority, the question to which extent and in what way this involvement should be realised, remains valid. Experience showed that all kinds of co-operation are conceivable and that different kinds of organisations may play divergent roles. Which forms of co-operation have demonstrated to be the most successful and what are the main obstacles that cities have experienced?

A related question is whether the local authority should strengthen existing self-organisations and/or encourage the creation of new organisations, as is being practised in some cities. Also many local authorities with an explicit policy towards self-organisations do not agree with a policy actively aiming at encouraging the creation of self-organisations, since they fear the negative, isolating impact that this might have.

In this respect, it is also interesting whether it is possible and desirable to make a distinction between 'integration-oriented' and 'self-oriented' organisations and to 'steer' developments by selectively supporting integration-oriented self-organisations.

Another area of concern is the risk of establishing too close ties between the local authorities and self-organisations. Many self-organisations are to a large extent financed by the very (local) authority they aim to influence. In order to effectively perform as interest groups, it is essential that self-organisations are not too dependent on the local authorities. This can allure self-organisations to pay lip-service to official policies, in order to guarantee funding. How can the involvement of self-organisations go together with the maintenance of their independent position, the very feature that makes self-organisation so unique?

3. The Role of Self-Organisations in Local Authorities

In this chapter the results of the questionnaires that were completed by member and non-member cities will be described and analysed. The questionnaire contains information on the type of migrant and ethnic minority organisations in the various cities, their main weaknesses and strengths, co-operation with the local authority, and their financial resources.¹¹

Types of self-organisations and their targets

Cultural organisations are the most common type of self-organisations. They fulfil an important role with regard to the maintenance of the own culture, but are sometimes also active in establishing contacts with other organisations. Their most common activities are folklore, music, art and dance. Religious organisations constitute the second most common type of self-organisation. They are mainly occupied with providing prayer services and religious education. Religious and cultural organisations are often strongly intertwined.

Other types of organisations are leisure and hobby organisations (in most cases sport clubs) and aid organisations, which are mainly oriented in giving help to their own members or refugees. Political organisations play a distinctive role, and are mostly characterised by their strong affiliation with political parties in the countries of origin. Less common are business organisations, youth and women's organisations, neighbourhood organisations and anti-racism groups.

It is important to notify that the distinction between the different types of organisations is somewhat artificial. A particular organisation can bear characteristics of several categories and the activities are often similar. Especially educational activities are widespread. Moreover, cultural aspects (e.g. language) play an important role in many organisations that could not be defined as strictly 'cultural'. The same applies to the defence of group interests, which plays a role in most organisations.

Most migrant and ethnic minority organisations are targeted at an individual background based on 'nationality', for instance a Turkish soccer club. Others are based on an ethnic background based on race or cultural relations (e.g. a Kurdish organisation), on gender or age (e.g. women's organisations) or on religion. Only a small number of organisations is targeted at all migrants and ethnic minorities.

¹¹ This chapter is based on questionnaires completed by the following cities: Tavros (G), Genk, Antwerp (B), Luxembourg (L), Deventer, The Hague, Rotterdam (NL), Manchester, Sheffield (UK), Helsinki (FI), Ulm (D), Roubaix (F), Stavanger (N), Loures, Sintra (P), Geneva (Switzerland)

The role, strengths and weaknesses of self-organisations

From the perspective of most local authority officers self-organisations have an important role in the defence of interests of the members of the own group. Since self-organisations are supposed to have closer contact with the communities they pretend to represent, local authorities generally consider them as important instruments that can identify gaps in the service provision to migrants and ethnic minorities. Self-organisations are also considered as important communication and information channels, through which information about regulations, rules and policies can be communicated, 'translated', and explained.

Maintenance of their own culture is considered as the second most important role of self-organisations. Mostly this means maintenance of own language, religion and keeping up traditions, with often a particular concern to transmit the culture to younger generations. In many cases this coincides with a strong orientation towards and contacts with the country or region of origin.

The above-mentioned capability of defending particular interest and mobilising its members is generally seen as the main strength of self-organisations. Their direct contacts on 'grassroots level' makes them unique and gives them a potentially strategic position. This explains why many local authorities are interested in establishing contacts with self-organisations.

Most local authorities see the big number and the lack of homogeneity as the most important weaknesses of self-organisations. Self-organisations are characterised by an enormous variety and a high degree of fragmentation. Competition is often fierce, and there seems to be a general incapability to establish functioning umbrella-organisations. Hence, they are often not capable of formulating common opinions and reaching consensus on joint actions. Due to this fragmentation, self-organisations are hindered in fully exploiting what is considered as their main strength, namely defending of interests of migrants and ethnic minorities.

A number of cities is concerned about the 'self-oriented', and 'conservative' character of many self-organisations, that would be too much oriented towards the country of origin and the own culture. This contributes to the general lack of interaction with other organisations, institutions and the local authority.

The lack of continuity within self-organisations is considered as another main weakness. Many organisations are dependent on a small number of people that easily gets overworked, and there are often continuous changes in the composition of committees. Furthermore lack of understanding of the role and the structure of the local authority among members and staff hinder self-organisations in their functioning.

The suggested measures to overcome weaknesses on the one hand and to make use of strengths on the other hand are remarkably similar. Namely, by overcoming their weaknesses, self-organisations will also be better capable to exploit their potential strengths. The first set of measures applies to strengthening the self-organisations themselves, which can be achieved through professional training of their staff, and through financial, logistic, and other support. Secondly most cities are convinced that self-organisations should be more involved in the local authority. Thirdly it is generally agreed upon that efforts should be made to improve communication between self-organisations, to develop networks and/or umbrella organisations, in order to overcome further fragmentation and isolation.

Co-operation with the local authority

Local authorities generally strive after closer co-operation with self-organisations, since it is believed that their explicit involvement can lead to the development of more responsive and effective policies. The most common type of co-operation is support of the local authority to migrant and ethnic minority organisations in particular, usually cultural, events. Co-operation can also be more structural. In most cities the local authority consults self-organisations on issues that affect ethnic minorities and migrants, in order to learn the particular needs and opinions of ethnic minorities and migrants. The same cities also use self-organisations as intermediaries for informing their members about the local authority. In both cases they the self-organisations act as a medium between the ethnic minority communities and the local authority. Self-organisations can also be involved through initiation of and participation in projects. These three forms of structural co-operation rarely exist separately, but mostly in combination with each other. This 'coexistence' is characteristic for cities with an active policy towards self-organisations.

Virtually all cities encourage the participation of self-organisations in local issues. This is often pursued through the establishment of consultative councils for the local authority. Equally common is participation through neighbourhood meetings on local issues or through the media. Only in some cities ethnic minorities can directly participate in local elections.

All cities give financial support to self-organisations, though mostly in a selective way. Support is generally restricted to organisations that are involved in (self-initiated) projects and activities. Self-organisations receive additional financial support from other authorities and institutions. Support is given by (in decreasing order of importance): regional governments, national governments, private donors, NGO's, the European Commission, and several foundations.

Conclusion

Local authorities generally see an important role for self-organisations. However, the fragmentation and discontinuity that currently characterises many self-organisations are impediments for fully exploiting their potential strengths. Generally there seems to be a clear need for more capable self-organisations, in order to make them a viable partner for local authorities. Competency-building through training and other forms of support are therefore necessary.