NOW
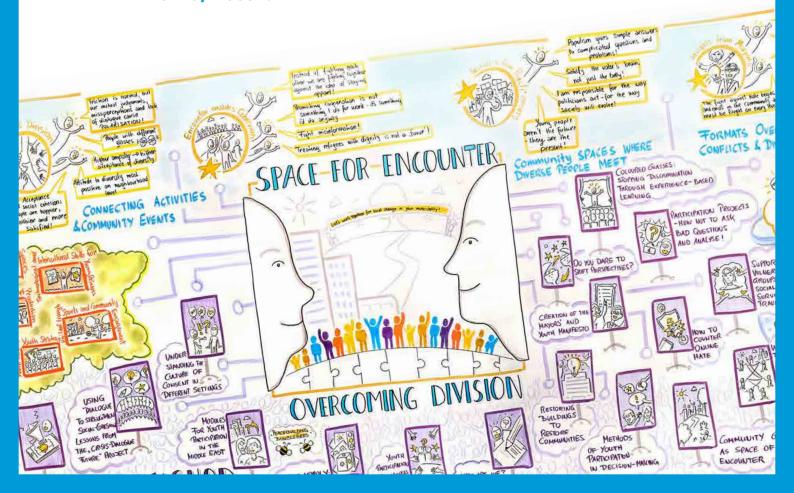
7TH INTERNATIONAL MAYORS' CONFERENCE

Space for Encounter – Overcoming Division

16 – 18 February 2020
Vienna, Austria

Content

Abstract

We sometimes have the feeling that we live in societies where polarisation is shaping our views and where cultural, religious and ethnic diversity as well as disparity and globalisation seem to be endangering our sense of social cohesion. But studies have revealed that people's views are more multifaceted and that polarising opinions have no majority. On the whole, individual acceptance of diversity is higher than we think and people are actively seeking a sense of togetherness despite all the tensions and aspects of diversity.

The 7th International Mayors' Conference NOW in Vienna, Austria (17-18 February, 2020) presented several key research findings and combined these with a wide variety of best practices that showcase tangible approaches to overcoming local divisions. Furthermore, several workshops supported the conference's aim of creating an impact by inspiring the participants to initiate local action when back home. This article outlines possible means of dealing effectively with tensions, of increasing acceptance of diversity and fostering cohesive societies at a local level.

"If you take the stories, the actions will follow"

"Dear ambassadors of a better world": this was how Austria's First Lady Doris Schmidauer welcomed the 220 participants of the 7th International Mayors' Conference NOW, which took place in Vienna from 17 to 18 February 2020. Participants from 30 countries, from the Middle East to northern Europe, including mayors, young citizens from all walks of life, community workers, innovative NGOs, well-known researchers and practitioners, social entrepreneurs and urban planners gathered in Vienna for two days. Their discussions focused on what it means to live in a better world where communities deal successfully with tensions, build spaces for encounters and interaction as well as strengthen their senses of belonging and social cohesion.

One of the conference's key messages was to create an impact by initiating local action. To this end, the 7th NOW Conference presented first-hand knowledge of current research findings, practical tools and innovative projects, with the aim of enabling participants to spring into action when they returned home. The conference's programme included ten "sparkling inputs" with encouraging narratives from outstanding speakers, 20 best practices that highlighted tangible solutions for overcoming local division, as well as 24 workshops that promoted hands-on learning and served as laboratories for both experiencing and testing ways to facilitate encounters and interaction.

This article revisits the different aspects of the conference in order to look more closely at the theories that were presented, the best practices that have inspired us, and the key ideas of which we made mental notes. Inclusiveness, the acceptance of

"The world in which we live has become a very strange place. Many of our achievements are under threat."

**André Heller,
co-founder of Act.Now**

diversity and social cohesion are shaped at the levels of neighbourhoods, towns, cities and regions and we invite our readers to use the conference's key learnings to actively participate in shaping their own communities. Everybody can be a "change maker".

Dividing society into two opposing camps? Feelings of polarisation and the reasons behind them

Polls have shown that the majority of people in European countries and in the USA believe that polarisation is decisively shaping our societies (Gentzkow, 2016; Gagné, NOW 7). This leads people to assume that there are more factors that divide than unite us. Are our achievements like peace, democracy, the minimum standards of morality, the freedom of speech and information, equality, and so on in danger? Jérémie Gagné is a political scientist and researcher for *More in Common*, a platform which conducts research and develops initiatives to overcome "division and strengthen people's sense of belonging and identity". He states that the polarisation we see today has a lot to do "with our mutual misperceptions that remain unchallenged for too long, our mutual judgements that are being made too quickly, with a dialogue that ends too soon." Gagné and his research team have observed that we cannot simply use categories like urban vs. rural, or young vs. old etc. to explain polarisation. If we take a closer look at people's opinions, most views are rather mixed or even contradictory, but randomly extreme left or extreme right. So why do we often picture two strong camps of equal size in combat with each other? Is it us vs. them, cosmopolitans vs. nationalists, black vs. white? As Gagné says, the fact that we tend to "view people who don't share our values as bad, ill-intentioned and deficient"

is typical human psychology. In fact, people hold very different views and none of them constitute a majority. It is therefore necessary to find out more about people's beliefs or fears (Gagné, NOW 7). In 2017, the German think tank Das Progressive Zentrum and its French partner Explain - Liegey Muller Pons interviewed people who voted for right-wing populist parties in Germany and France. Islamophobic, xenophobic or Eurosceptic feelings did not prevail in their personal descriptions of the political contexts. They rather felt abandoned because politicians set the wrong priorities and neglect essential local measures designed to tackle challenges people face in their everyday lives. "When people see that their local area is being structurally weakened, whether this occurs through the removal of a post box or the closure of bus lines, they tend to feel devalued" (Hillje, 2018, 22).

"Nobody likes division … we crave a sense of togetherness."

**Jérémie Gagné,
More in Common Germany**

There is no doubt that political decisions which at first sight seem to favour certain groups in society and ignore the needs of others, cause feelings of political abandonment where offering support and paying attention are clearly needed. As a result, citizens are increasingly venting their general frustration and disappointment upon political decision makers, and recently more and more on local politicians like mayors. The results of a recent poll in Germany on attacks on mayors showed that already 65% of mayors report to have been victims of verbal and/or physical threats and attacks in 2020 (Kommunal, 2020, 03 10). The same poll from 2019 revealed that 41 % believe attacks are increasing and that political engagement is less valued. At the NOW Conference, four mayors – Isabella Conti (San Lazzaro di Savena, Italy), Igor Marentic (Postojna, Slovenia), Mohamed Saadieh (Dannieh Union of Municipalities, Lebanon) and Tjark Bartels (formerly of the Hameln-Pyrmont district authority, Germany) – shared their experiences with the audience, describing the pressure they are under and the different forms of

attacks they have encountered. San Lazzaro mayor Conti had to justify her support for refugees to residents who shouted at her: "Why do you help them when we need help too?" Conti understood that she had to counter the hate speech and verbal attacks on her by seeking dialogue and personal engagement with her opponents. She is convinced that we have to invest in those who show their discontent. Otherwise, they will feel even more alienated and will endanger the social cohesion in the community (NOW 7, Mayor's Talk).
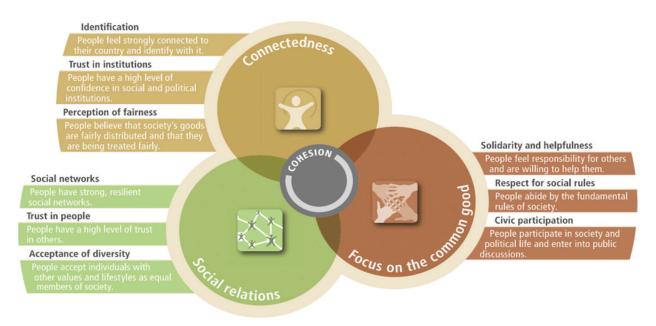
What represents an appropriate reaction to hate speech and attacks, which are often carried out by right-wing populists (Die Zeit, 2019, 12 23), of course depends on the individual case. A face-to-face encounter with the attackers is not always possible; sometimes legal steps have to be taken. What local decision makers need is more solidarity from their communities, as well as political and legal support from their governments. It is the mayors' task to promote the well-being of their communities, while the community has a duty to respect their political commitment and support mayors like Marentic who says "Anyway, I will run again [for the next elections], because I feel I can do something."

Overcoming division: The correlation between social cohesion and the acceptance of diversity

"Phenomena such as social media filter bubbles and hate speech are causing insecurity about what we should believe and what we shouldn't," says Regina Arant from the *Jacobs University Bremen* in Germany. Furthermore, populists, disparity and globalization, as well as cultural, religious and ethnic diversity are endangering our feelings of social cohesion (Bertelsmann-Stiftung,

Source: Delhey/ Boehnke, 2018

2017). The diversity of life can cause feelings of hesitance and hostility but it can also "bear chances and opportunities" (Arant, NOW 7). But what do social cohesion and diversity mean, and how are both related to each other?
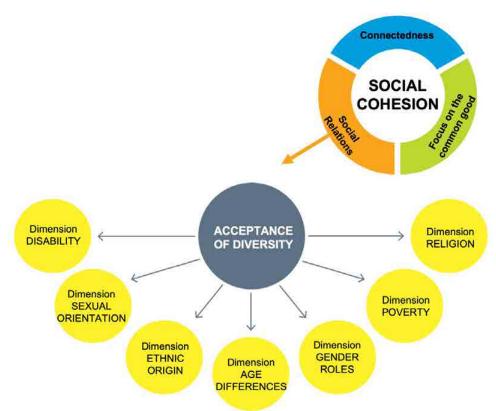
Social cohesion means that people 1. feel connected with each other and with their society as a whole (connectedness), 2. focus on the common good of everybody; and 3. have strong social relations.

According to the *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, any characteristics can be measured in order to analyse the degree of social cohesion in a society. The German Robert Bosch Foundation carried out a survey in 2019 in order to find out whether the alleged decrease in social cohesion correlates with acceptance of social diversity, and, if so, what steps can be taken to counter the reduced acceptance of diversity (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2019, 11). Despite defining diversity as ethnic, cultural and religious differences, the survey outlines seven dimensions of diversity: age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, religion, and low socio-economic standing. One of the survey's key findings is that diversity in Germany is generally seen as "an asset rather than a danger" (ibid., 15). Furthermore, the acceptance of diversity is greater in regions with higher income disparities – in other words "the existence of a certain level of diversity" can be a pre-condition for learning to accept diversity in general. Nevertheless, there are regions in Germany – and in other

countries – where acceptance of diversity, or of certain dimensions of diversity, can be rated differently. It is therefore important to differentiate between accepting diversity and simply tolerating inconsistencies and differences (ibid., 11). "Tolerance means: I don't really like something but am willing to live with it. Acceptance is fundamentally different, it means that I take it into my heart and live it.", (Patricia Kahane, NOW 7).

Acceptance of diversity has a decisive influence on social cohesion. People living in areas with strong acceptance of diversity are happier, healthier and more satisfied. Based on his research, Jérémie Gagné from More in Common has found that despite the differences people feel in a pluralistic and socially diverse society, as well as their dissatisfaction with political developments, the majority of people "crave a sense of togetherness." People are keen to find a common sense and to come together (Gagné, NOW 7; Krause/Gagné, 2019, 18).

How is it actually possible to strengthen acceptance of diversity, to overcome political and social divisions, and ultimately to foster cohesive societies? One of the basic aims of the NOW Conference was to share knowledge and put it into action. The following sections will analyse some examples of the promising practices, workshop results and sparkling inputs that were presented, put them into the context of scientific research results and identify possible opportunities for action at the local level.

Source: Arant/Dragolov, et al., 2019

Inter-group contact

Coming from the Greek-speaking community on the island of Cyprus, Andri Christofides discovered during her studies in Belgium that her research on Cypriot national identity excluded the Turkish-speaking community of Cyprus. She crossed the buffer zone for the first time at the age of 24. Meanwhile in 2009, Hayriye Rüzgar decided to study political science and international relations due to her interest in the Cyprus conflict. In 2003, the checkpoints started to open, enabling contact between the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities. However, neither Andri nor Hayriye, who were already in their mid-twenties, had had any meaningful contacts with someone from the other side until they joined the organisation Home for Cooperation, which "brings communities closer, based on contact and through their common interests and

"Social cohesion cannot be programmed, it is born out of personal contact."

**Patricia Kahane,
co-founder of Act.Now**

arts-based peace-building programmes" (Andri and Hayriye, NOW 7). This story helps us to understand one crucial aspect in overcoming divisions between different groups: contact.

In 1954 Gordon Allport, an American professor of social psychology, published his pioneering work "The Nature of Prejudice". He states that prejudices are reduced through positive and personal cross-group or inter-group contact. However, ideal contact can only be guaranteed if at least some of the four positive factors identified by Allport are fulfilled, namely: a) equal status between the groups, b) common goals, c) inter-group cooperation, and d) support from authorities, laws or customs (Allport, 1954, ch. 16). Allport's observations have been scientifically proven in numerous studies while scientists Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp have added a fifth positive factor to the contact hypothesis: the potential of

friendship in inter-group contact. Friendships across different groups have proven to be very powerful forms of inter-group contact (Pettigrew/ Tropp, 2006). Andri and Hayriye grew up in two different ethnic communities on the same island experiencing mutual misperceptions and prejudices towards the other. They became friends and learned to overcome their misapprehensions through their joint work for the Home for Cooperation community centre in Nicosia's buffer zone – and now they show others how they can have the same experience. Allport's theory has been proven once again.

Most of the time, inter-group contact does not happen accidentally. One of the four factors mentioned above is support from authorities and social institutions, which enables positive inter-group engagement. In other words, municipalities can provide spaces and create events where people with all their diverse characteristics can come together for meaningful encounters in order to increase social cohesion in diverse communities. These include the entire social and socioeconomic infrastructure, public spaces, joint actions for the common good, cultural and sports events, neighbourhood and street festivals, as well as enabling digital and personal dialogue.

Learning each other's language

For example, the municipality of Kamenica in Kosovo has created a space for contact and exchange between the Serbian and Albanian communities – the communication barriers between them stem from the war in Kosovo in the late 1990's. The ongoing division between the communities has led to more pressing issues, such as stereotyping and prejudice, as well as unemployment. In response, the municipality of Kamenica started to offer Serbian and Albanian language courses where people have the chance to meet and learn each other's languages. These courses are also used to discuss common issues and enable people to work together on a vision for the future of the multilingual community.

Celebrating the beauty of diversity

Another example of a way of fostering inter-group contact by means of grassroots activities is the annual MEASC festival in Dublin. Hosted by the *Dublin City Interfaith Forum*, the one-day festival showcases the beauty and richness of faith and culture in Dublin's various religious communities – "measc" is the Irish Gaelic word for "mix". All of the city's religious communities participate in the festival, offering workshops, activities and traditional food. The festival counters prejudice by raising awareness and helping people to embrace the different aspects of diversity. In 2019 the festival took place for the third time and it continues to inspire people to take positive actions in their communities, and to work together on positive and sustainable social change.

Crisis. Dialogue. Future

Prejudice is "thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant", as Allport put it. In most cases, prejudices are a mixture of a few memories associated with people from a certain group, combined with hearsay and a final over-generalisation. The facts about other groups that people pretend to know are mostly "scanty and strained" (Allport, 1954, 6). So far, we have learned that positive contact between different groups is only possible if various factors play a part in the encounter. One type of engagement that helps to mitigate prejudices is dialogue. This is the central motor of society, because we are able to articulate our preferred courses of action while we jointly struggle to find common ground (Bochmann/ Döring, 2020, 4). The NOW Conference spotlighted several projects dealing with different forms of dialogue.

Crisis – Dialogue – Future, a research project being conducted by the Technical University of Dresden, is examining the

power of dialogue in times of crisis. Local public dialogues between political decision makers and citizens are a successful and a solution-oriented approach when conflicts have weakened the sense of social cohesion (for more details, see Schumacher, 2020). With this in mind, the project team has looked at different forms of crisis dialogue to develop an innovative tool for crisis communication. Several key findings from the project were discussed during a workshop at the NOW Conference to find out how municipalities can improve their ability to initiate and facilitate dialogues between citizens. As a result, different levels of crisis escalation require different crisis dialogue formats. In the case of polarising tendencies in a community, discussion formats featuring well-prepared facilitation are highly important.

In 2016, the German newspaper *Die Zeit* initiated the debate series Germany Talks in cooperation with five other media partners. By the end of 2019, 14,000 people "with widely diverging political views" had sat down and talked to one another. Last year's discussion topics were whether men and women in Germany enjoy the same opportunities, the effects of migration and German-Russian relations. The series has been accompanied by numerous surveys. One of the research findings is that it takes two hours of conversation to reduce prejudices between people with contrasting political views (Die Zeit, 2019, 11 19). However, removing prejudices does not necessarily imply that you share the same opinion at the end of the conversation. But it does help to realise that our conversation partner is less hostile or stupid than we might have thought beforehand (NOW 7 workshop: Fighting Polarisation – How inter-group contact can help overcome (emotional) polarisation). At the end of the day, a one-on-one political discussion bolsters social cohesion and, depending on the people involved, can help to reduce stereotypes and prejudices (Falk/Stötzer/Walter, 2019. 4).

Reconciliation through storytelling

Contact and dialogue do not only help to remove prejudices towards others; they also help to reconcile groups in times of armed conflict and war. The Iraqi NGO *Peace and Freedom Organisation* works with returning communities in the Niniveh Plains area, which was under ISIS control for several years since from 2014. The Nineveh Plains is one of the most diverse regions in Iraq, with around 14 different ethno-religious communities, including Christians (Catholic, Orthodox, Chaldean), Yezidis, Muslims (Sunni and Shia, Arab, Turkmen and Kurd) and Kakai. After the areas were retaken, the communities returned to their destroyed villages, and intercommunal conflicts surfaced in the process. One key tool in rebuilding trust between communities is storytelling: the Iraqi NGO formed "local peace committees" to encourage intercommunal interaction and provide a setting where different sections of society could tell their own stories. Both those who remained in the area when ISIS took control and those who fled all suffered, albeit in different ways; raising awareness of this joint struggle helps build empathy and paves the way for reconciliation.

"As long as you accuse the other person, you are not able to listen, you are not able to build a relationship and you are not able to build trust."

**Lea Suter,
Secretary General of the UN
Association Switzerland**

The three projects described above tackle problems arising from political polarisation and socio-cultural tensions on a macro level, since they address topics affecting entire regions and even countries. But what about acceptance of diversity on a micro level? Disparity, diversity and polarising factors can also be part of daily life if we look at a smaller communal entity, the neighbourhoods.
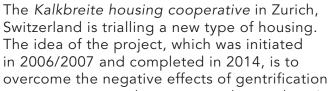
"It's the neighbourhood"

The Robert Bosch Stiftung's 2019 Diversity Barometer, which examines acceptance of diversity and its impact on the degree of social cohesion, found that people are more likely to accept diverse groups (e.g. migrants, homosexuals, or welfare recipients, etc.) in their neighbourhood than in their own family. In other words, people who generally have a rather disapproving and hostile attitude towards certain groups actually react less negatively if representatives of these groups live in their own neighbourhood (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2019, 84–88).

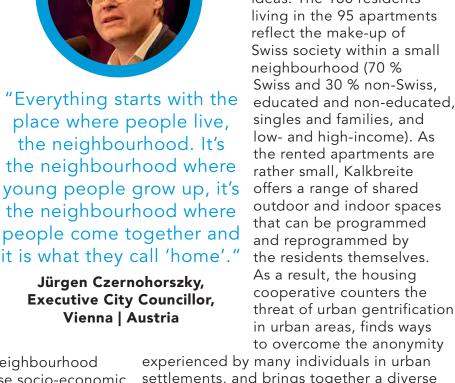This key finding shows that local governments should invest in constructive measures aimed at overcoming division at the neighbourhood level (such as planning diverse socio-economic and cultural quarters and neighbourhoods). Jürgen Czernohorszky in his sparkling input at the 7th NOW Conference commented that "[we] have to work at the neighbourhood level to accumulate bridging capital … every institution in the neighbourhood has to be a space for encounters". Therefore, urban planning has to consider the idea that Rasmus Frisk, founder of the Danish urban consultancy *arki_lab*, contributed to the NOW Conference's "lines of thought": "In designing our cities it's okay to think big. Just remember that people are small."

"Everything starts with the place where people live, the neighbourhood. It's the neighbourhood where young people grow up, it's the neighbourhood where people come together and it is what they call 'home'."

**Jürgen Czernohorszky,
Executive City Councillor,
Vienna | Austria**

The *Kalkbreite housing cooperative* in Zurich, Switzerland is trialling a new type of housing. The idea of the project, which was initiated in 2006/2007 and completed in 2014, is to overcome the negative effects of gentrification and to promote the residents' participation in aspects ranging from everyday life issues to the implementation of new concepts and ideas. The 160 residents living in the 95 apartments reflect the make-up of Swiss society within a small neighbourhood (70 % Swiss and 30 % non-Swiss, educated and non-educated, singles and families, and low- and high-income). As the rented apartments are rather small, Kalkbreite offers a range of shared outdoor and indoor spaces that can be programmed and reprogrammed by the residents themselves. As a result, the housing cooperative counters the threat of urban gentrification in urban areas, finds ways to overcome the anonymity experienced by many individuals in urban settlements, and brings together a diverse group of people who share a building.

Joint campaigning for Horsh Beirut

"What would it be like if somebody took the living room out of your house? There would be no space for encounters." These words, written by a member of the Lebanese youth-led NGO *NAHNOO* (Arabic for "we") for the conference's "lines of thought", pinpointed the fact that for many years the municipality of Beirut neglected the preservation of green public spaces, where city's residents can meet and spend their leisure time. In 2010, NAHNOO started a campaign for the opening of the Horsh

Connected living

Beirut, the largest park in the city, which had been closed to the public for more than 20 years following the end of the civil war. After the successful reopening of the park in 2015, NAHNOO continued to work on its revitalisation. The closed park used to be a symbol of the segregation of three surrounding areas, which are inhabited by the three largest religious communities (Sunni, Shia and Christian). By campaigning for the park's reopening, the neighbours and young people worked together for a common cause, leading to greater understanding and acceptance of each other. After Horsh Beirut opened its doors, the park brought people together in a peaceful green space. And it triggered hope among citizens that their voices can be heard, and that they have the power to jointly shape their cities in line with their needs and wishes.

"We have understood that this young generation is key to shaping the future."

Elke Zuckermann, co-founder of Act.Now

Every one of us can act: Final remarks

Prior to the conference, *Act.Now* facilitated a two-day workshop for all 60 young people (aged 15-24) participating in the conference. Even though they came from very different backgrounds, they shared a similar vision of what social cohesion in our communities means, showing that the idea of living together peacefully is universal. Along with politicians, regional and municipal civil servants, and an international network of experts, the Act.Now programme of The Innovation in Politics Institute is addressing the young generations with all of its activities. We are convinced that young people and their futures are directly affected by decisions made today about how we choose to live together. It is essential that local decision makers understand that young people can also come up with solutions for problems and that integrating their knowledge, insights and concerns is vital to shaping both the present and the future.

"I want to feel heard and listened to as I did at the NOW Conference." In line with these words from one of the young participants, the Youth-Mayor Pamphlet (which was drawn up in the course of the conference) demands that local decision makers talk to young people, inform them, try to implement their ideas and, when they are not listened to, speak up for them. Our organisation aims to continuously promote the inclusion of young people from all walks of life when it comes to taking action at the local level. Edoardo Caroli, a young Italian activist, put the conference's key lessons in a nutshell: "Stop saying 'youth is the future', it is the present".

The 7th International Mayors' Conference NOW was in itself a space for encounters. It offered tried-and-tested solutions for overcoming polarisation and social division by creating spaces for encounters in different areas of action. As simple as it might sound, countering polarisation with dialogue on an equal footing, overcoming prejudices through inter-group contact and accepting diversity as a potential source of innovation is what strengthens the sense of social cohesion in our communities. Social contact is the lifeblood of democracy and politics should connect people. Today, it is even more imperative that we safeguard the possibilities democracy offers us, and to become politically and socially active.

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