

CASE STUDY OF “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”

Title:

The Sikh community requests a permit to organise a procession in a public area.

Location:

The town is one of the biggest and most crowded Catalan municipalities. It belongs to a large metropolitan area and many areas have great cultural diversity. Many of the immigrants are from other areas of Spain (having arrived in the 1960s and 1970s) and from other continents (arriving mainly around the 1990s). These areas are working class and have an increasingly high unemployment rate, sometimes reaching 30%, as well as important structural deficiencies (in relation to social and health services), which are worsened by the disengaged attitudes of the surrounding neighbours. This all generates tension that is manipulated by some political parties for their own political interests.

Approximate start and end dates (if applicable) of the mediation process:

January – May 2010

Actors involved:

Actors directly involved:

- **The Sikh community** was established in the city a decade ago and has a temple with capacity for 300 people for Sikhs from all around the metropolitan region. The men mainly work in construction and many women work at home. The immense majority are of Indian origin. Generally, they speak little or no Spanish or Catalan. Despite their lack of resources, they have good organisational and entrepreneurial skills.
- **The City Council**, governed by a coalition of socialists and Catalan nationalists is faced with a strong right-wing movement in opposition that has increasingly radical views on the integration of the immigrants. The Catalan nationalists manage the Department for Citizenship and Living Together and are responsible for managing local religious diversity, while the socialists manage the Department for Town Planning which is in charge of everything related to the use of public buildings and space. Furthermore, each district in this large city is governed by members of one of the coalition parties. The differences between the parties make any process related to the demands or situation of the religious communities difficult, often leading to dead end situations. The management of religious diversity has become a very real political battle horse.
- **The Neighbourhood Association near the Sikh temple.** The majority of its members are elderly and originally from other parts of Spain. They are especially concerned about gender equality. They do not know the leaders of the Sikh community personally and despite the numerous prejudices they express in relation to immigrants in general, they are curious about and interested in the diverse people of their neighbourhood. In Catalonia, this type of association used to be quite active and influential in working class neighbourhoods with large numbers of Spanish immigrants, fighting for their rights. Today, despite being present, they are not as active or influential. However, very often they are still the only “official voice” of the neighbours.

Mediating actors:

- **The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia** has been developing a programme over the past four years to facilitate relationships between the different religious communities, and between these communities and the non religious civil society and the City Council. The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia mediators maintain fluid communication with the head of the Sikh community, mostly through their participation in different groups of interreligious dialogue.

Key information related to the background and the context of the case (before the mediation process):

At the end of 2009, the Sikh community approached the Department for Citizenship and Living Together and requested use of public space in May 2010 in order to organise a procession in the streets next to the temple to commemorate the birth of the community (*kha/sa*). The previous year, this same request had been denied mainly due to “the lack of time to inform and prepare the neighbours”. This time, in 2009, the City Council’s condition was that they had to carry out previous work with the Neighbourhood Association closest to the temple, in order to “prepare the neighbours”. However, the Sikh community and the Neighbourhood Association, just a few buildings away, had never had any previous contact and the City Council asked the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia to facilitate the communication between the two. The Sikhs are a religious minority in Catalonia and, generally, the Catalans know very little about them and tend to confuse them with Muslims. When the community became established in the neighbourhood ten years before, the police telephoned the Neighbourhood Association to collect information on the Sikh community. This telephone call put the Association leaders on alert. With time, however, and due to the absence of conflict, suspicion was replaced by indifference.

Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:

To provide a space for dialogue between the Sikh community and the Neighbourhood Association in order to establish a relationship based on mutual trust and obtain the support of the leaders of the Association for the organisation of the street procession.

Brief description of the development of the mediation carried out:

The mediation process was carried out in three phases:

(1) **Bringing the communities closer together** through various bilateral meetings and the mediation services of the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia and the Department in charge of local religious diversity management. The community spokesperson explained who the Sikhs were, and, from the start, announced their desire to organise a street procession. Thanks to these first contact meetings, a consensus was reached to organise an event open to the public in the Neighbourhood Association's area where the Sikhs would present their religion. The leaders of the Association demanded that this event specifically include a female perspective. The event took place, was transmitted on local television and all involved valued it very positively.

(2) **Organisation of the procession** whereby the community and Department of Citizenship and Living Together demanded the explicit support of the Association. This support consisted in the leaders of both parties to jointly completing an application form to request permission from the City Council to carry out the street procession. In this way, the religious event was presented in the same way as any another neighbourhood event and the Department in charge of managing local religious diversity felt more legitimate when defending it to the political opposition and opposition from other neighbours. The procession was therefore authorised.

(3) **Organisation and implementation of the procession.** The event was celebrated on a Sunday morning, with the participation of around 1,000 Sikh men and women from all over Catalonia. The procession escorted a carriage in the image of the Golden Temple (the most important temple in this religion, located in India). The organisation was exemplary and there were no incidents or problems despite the fact the large number of people surprised and slightly frightened the Association leaders. The Sikhs handed out leaflets about their religion and celebration. One young person from the community was in charge of accompanying the neighbours' leaders. At the end of the procession, the community publicly thanked those present for allowing them to celebrate this day and invited the various actors involved (mediators, neighbours and politicians) to say a few words. The political presence and diversity stood out especially with the presence of the different departments and political parties, including those who had previously been against the celebration of the event, and some politicians from the national level.

Assessment of the level of success in reaching the initial objectives:

The various parties were satisfied despite expressing some issues to be improved. The Neighbourhood Association felt a little misled regarding to the magnitude of the event and due to the fact that the City Council was only present at the end of the procession, at the time of the speeches. Some neighbours did complain to them about the event. However, the Association was satisfied in general for having been involved in the whole process and expressed their wish to continue to consolidate this relationship, with the participation of the Sikhs in the Association's events (starting with a children's event and especially in those that tackle gender issues). The Sikh community, very satisfied, committed to this. Both were invited to speak on the local radio to tell their account of the experience. The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia also positively evaluated the event, despite considering that constant monitoring of the situation is required as well as willingness, on both sides, to take their relationship further than the organisation of this event. It is interesting to note that despite the willingness of the Association to help the community, their opinions and expressions were wrought with prejudices.

Mediator resources mobilized (human, spiritual, community, etc. resources belonging to the involved actors or resources of the mediating actors):

- The previously established relationship of trust between the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia and the leaders of the Sikh community and the explicit legitimisation of its role as mediator by the City Council in the eyes of all actors involved.
- The geographical proximity of the Association and Community and the absence of historical conflict.
- The curious and tolerant attitude of the Neighbourhood Association towards the community and towards diversity in general (sometimes surprisingly incoherent with an intolerant discourse).
- The organisational capacity of the Sikh community, and especially the tradition of offering Indian food to everyone, which usually breaks barriers and creates open attitudes.

Expenses related to the mediation intervention (working hours of the mediators, materials needed...):

Previous meetings between all those involved and various bilateral meetings and procedures.