

## **CASE STUDY OF “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”**

### **Title:**

**A Muslim community originally from Sub-Saharan Africa requests that the City Council provide them with a place to teach the Koran to children.**

### **Location:**

This occurred at a municipality in the Catalan Coast, where the economy is mainly focused on tourism, particularly in the summer. According to the census, there are 40,000 residents, of which nearly 7,000 were born abroad and 1,500 were born in Sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of these Sub-Saharans are Muslim.

### **Approximate start and end dates of the mediation process:**

December 2008 – June 2009.

### **Actors involved:**

#### **Actors directly involved:**

- **The Muslim Community from Sub-Saharan Africa**, the largest minority group, mainly resides in a working class area where its place of worship is located in an old underground building. Although it has a permit, it is in very precarious conditions.
- **The Local Council**, a coalition government with very different ideologies.

#### **Other involved actors:**

- **Other religious communities in the town**, mainly the Catholic Parish of the same area and the other Muslim community, from the Maghreb, which has its place of worship in another neighborhood. These religious communities are in contact through the interreligious group of dialogue coordinated by the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia.

#### **Mediating actors:**

- **The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia**, a secular organisation that has an agreement with the Local Council to coordinate an interreligious group of dialogue between the local religious communities, and to build bridges and mediate between the council and the religious organisations.

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

Despite being the largest of the oldest communities in the town (second generation children have been born here), the Muslim Community from Sub-Saharan Africa has still not settled in to the extent that its process of integration seems to be regressing according to rumors circulating about a religious discourse that is becoming more and more exclusive, about members going back to traditional uses and customs, women from the community disappearing from public life, children being sent back to their country of origin to be educated with non-western values, etc. Sub-Saharan mediators confirm that this community is one of the hardest communities to work with: due to the low levels of education of the first generations, the families' lack of resources, the importation of certain 'shocking' customs from the country of origin (like polygamy and female genital mutilation and the treatment women receive as a result), etc.

In the face of this complex multicultural and multireligious reality, at times (but not systematically) the Local Administration prefers not provide what is understood as certain "concessions" that would compromise its principle of secularity and question its defense of Human Rights, particularly regarding a native society partially influenced by a xenophobic discourse which is increasingly present in Catalonia and Europe. For this reason, the Local Council denied the cession of a public place to teach the Koran to the children of the community, and also, some months before, a place for the public presentation of a Baha'i inspired organisation.

**Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:**

To find an alternative solution to the administration's negative answer to the request and use this solution to create a more positive and constructive dynamic between the Muslim community from Sub-Saharan Africa and other local groups.

### **Brief description of the development of the mediation carried out:**

The Muslim community from Sub-Saharan Africa contacted the member of UNESCO Centre of Catalonia working in this municipality to ask for help in communicating their request to the Council for a place to give children classes on the Koran at weekends, as the space at the mosque was insufficient for this activity.

The Council replied negatively to the request and the option to seek help from the Muslim community from the Maghreb was ruled out (as this community was located too far from the area in question and due to existing competition between the communities about their dialogue with the council). At this point, the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia contacted the person in charge of the Catholic community in the area, primarily to consult him about possible private spaces that may be available. Immediately, the head of the parish expressed his belief that this was a good opportunity to encourage social cohesion in the area and offered to share one of their spaces, normally used for parish activities, with the Muslim Community. The only condition was the establishment of a trial period of six months, before evaluating the satisfaction of both communities. The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia also suggested drafting a document outlining other minimum conditions, mainly regarding maintenance of the place. The agreement was formalised and signed by both communities at a meeting where the Koran teachers were able to meet the parish priest and a copy of the keys was handed over.

In the first few months, due to organisational problems, the Muslim community used the space sporadically; however, progressively, it began to be used more regularly. During this first phase, the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia carried out intensive follow-up and informed the rector of any news, however insignificant. The possibility of explaining and defending this decision to the Catholic community was introduced but was deemed unnecessary by the parish priest. After the first six months, and in the absence of any conflict, both parties decided to renew the agreement indefinitely. This was formalised in another meeting, this time without the presence of the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia.

Two years later, the space is now used by women rather than for children's activities. Within the council, people have thanked and expressed admiration of the parish priest's decision. Others have criticised him for "going beyond his job description" and "compromising the sacredness of the space".

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

The solution offered by the Catholic parish, and the fact that no conflict was provoked (no visible conflict was observed), enabled links to be created and reinforced between the Catholic and Muslim communities of the area. The Muslim Sub-Saharan community's commitment to interreligious dialogue was also reaffirmed and this led to a more regular and diverse presence in the interreligious dialogue local group (several meetings have been hosted in the community's mosque). Despite this, the presence of the community in the dialogue group is still characterised mainly by their own prejudices and those of others. However, the decision made by the Catholic community and the mediation carried out have opened a door to working on this.

Regarding the decision by the Council not to provide a space to the community, the community learnt that 'what is public is contrary to what is religious'. The case, therefore, can only be judged as partially positive in favor of better integration of the Muslim Sub-Saharan community in the municipality. The social relations between Muslim Sub-Saharan and native citizens in non interreligious spaces are still not fluid.

### **Mediator resources mobilized:**

- The existing interreligious links previously created and promoted through the meetings of the local interreligious dialogue group. The trust held by the communities in the mediating agent, also created through the interreligious group this person coordinates.
- Principles and values like solidarity, generosity, gratitude, trust, etc. exemplarily materialised by the Catholic community.

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

Successive bilateral meetings of approximately one hour's duration were held with the Muslim community, the Council and the Catholic community; then one meeting with both communities and posterior bilateral follow up meetings were also carried out. Telephone conversations to communicate the results of the different bilateral meetings related to the follow up of the agreement.