How can we unlock the potential of cultural diversity in cities?

Cultural diversity is not new to Britain, but the 'multicultural' approach through which we have understood diversity and shaped policy for the past four decades is now being called into question. This study, by Phil Wood, Charles Landry and Jude Bloomfield, explores ways of unlocking the potential of cities' cultural diversity. It identifies practical strategies to encourage intercultural exchange between different groups. The research found:

- In comparison to many other countries, the general policy discourse around cultural diversity in the UK treats it as a problem to be solved, rather than an opportunity to be grasped. Evidence from the business world, however, suggests that there is a 'diversity advantage' that can lead to innovations, access to new markets and cheaper goods.

- Intercultural engagement has always been a source of innovation, whether in business or policy-making. The catalyst can often be remarkable individuals or groups who are prepared to cross cultural and social boundaries. These people are *intercultural innovators.*

- There is at present a lack of data and methodologies available to understand and measure cultural interchange. For example, Census data cannot tell us about the exchange of ideas between groups, or whether people from different groups socialise together. This shortfall may be addressed by the introduction of new tools of quantitative, qualitative and documentary methods: the *indicators of interculturalism and openness.*

- The researchers propose new approaches, and highlight examples of good practice. They suggest this means looking afresh at the way towns and cities are run through an *intercultural lens.* A greater emphasis on interaction, bridging and the exchange of ideas can lead to a 'diversity dividend' of social and economic benefits for our communities.

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Background

The project set out to explore the connections between cultural diversity, innovation and thriving and prosperous urban communities, in the context of Britain's economic, social and cultural population mix. It developed strategies to use the potential of diverse communities and their innovation and so provide tools for policymakers, planners and practitioners. The research also helped participating cities to develop specific economic, social, cultural and planning policies with the aim of becoming role models for others.

Lessons from the business approach

Evidence from the business world suggests that there is a 'diversity advantage' that can provide opportunities. Diversifying a workforce introduces new skills and aptitudes, often leading to innovations, and provides access to new markets and a variety of cheaper goods. There is also evidence that a tolerant and diverse setting can attract wealth creators to an area. In societies where immigration lies at the heart of national identity, such as the United States and Canada, diversity has often been seen as a source of potential opportunity and advantage.

The private sector has led the way on this, evolving the idea that there is a 'business case for diversity' because diverse teams of people bring new skills and aptitudes which can produce new process and product innovations to advance competitiveness. More research, policy development and practice innovation needs to be devoted to exploring the potential benefits. A change in mindset is also required so that more businesses see a mixed management team and workforce as a source of new skills and innovations; so that local authorities and others begin to see mixed communities as a desirable and achievable outcome; and so that individuals come to regard their lives enriched through contacts with others from different backgrounds.

From multiculturalism to interculturalism

Since the 1950s, Britain has developed substantial 'visible minority' communities and national policies, whether liberal or restrictive, have responded to related housing, employment, educational and cultural needs. For forty years, 'multiculturalism' has been the policy orthodoxy within which legislation and values have been set.

Multiculturalism sought to protect and celebrate diversity, with minority languages, religions and cultural practices encouraged and rights enshrined in legislation. Recently, this approach has been questioned and, particularly at the local level, some argue that it has encouraged culturally

and spatially distinct communities, leading 'parallel lives'. It is argued that the maintenance of difference has become the very means by which status and resources are acquired, so that multiculturalism speaks only for minorities and alienates white working-class people, driving them away from tolerance and towards extremism.

Without abandoning multiculturalism altogether, the researchers propose an 'interculturalism', which emphasises interaction and the exchange of ideas between different cultural groups. This goes beyond equal opportunities and respect for cultural differences, to the transformation of public space, institutions and civic culture. It is also distinct from the current arguments made for integration and community cohesion. It argues for a much more proactive engagement between cultures, and sees conflict as an inevitable and creative process. This suggests mutual learning and growth, and gaining skills to allow interaction between different people, regardless of their origins – an *intercultural competence.*

The intercultural lens

Cities can become more intercultural by taking a fresh look at what they do. This requires 'cultural literacy' – the capacity to acquire and use knowledge about cultures. Our behaviour is a result of our culture, whether ethnic, organisational or professional. This requires professionals working in communities to question their own assumptions and expectations at all times, as well as those of the community. The process of engagement can cover exploration of a community's history, cultural institutions and values, through art, skills, crafts, media, oral history and memory. The process of engagement can become as much an experience of community bonding as a research tool.

The study re-evaluated six aspects of local activity, through an intercultural lens:

Public consultation and engagement
The multiculturalist approach to public consultation assumes communities are defined by their ethnicity and consulted in isolation (i.e. 'the African Caribbean community', 'the Asian community', etc.) as if ethnicity is the only factor influencing the way in which people will lead their lives in the city. Identity, however, is far more complex. If more community engagement were conducted in 'intercultural spaces' and based on the premise of diverse groups attempting to address common issues of mutual interest, then a greater level of cross-cultural understanding and empathy could be achieved.

Urban planning and development

In city-making, are the basic building blocks of the city the same when looked at through intercultural eyes? Think about street frontages, building heights, pavement widths, turning circles, the number and size of windows and the use of materials, light, colour and water. Should architects and planners structure space to reflect different cultures and use spaces in varied ways? Or should open-ended spaces be created, which others can adapt to? In a survey of residents in Lewisham and Bristol to identify popular intercultural spaces, the places mentioned most were not the highly designed or engineered public and corporate spaces but rather the mundane spaces of day-to-day exchange, such as libraries, schools, colleges, youth centres, sports clubs, specific cinemas, the hair salon, the hospital, markets and community centres.

Business and entrepreneurship

The study also looked at British-based entrepreneurs from different cultures to understand the intercultural context of their success and found that a feeling of separation from the mainstream leads them to innovate. Each builds on the social, economic and cultural strengths of their original community, but then departs from it and creates something that at times is alien, or in conflict with their own community. However, it is precisely this tension and the need to break with tradition that give them the impetus to expand into new ventures.

Schools

The study's research in Leicester found that schools are fundamental to building an interculturally competent society. Creative pursuits, such as drama, media and conflict resolution, proved to be strong themes around which to build cultural literacy.

The arts and creative industries

Like education, sport and the arts can provide focuses for intercultural engagement. Shared spaces in the arts can be created which are new to all cultures, while team sports provide great potential for increased interaction between communities.

Sport

Few cities have focused on sport and immigrant communities, although some headway has been made with the 'Racial Equality & Sport Project' in Leicester, whose goals are to promote cultural awareness among providers through 'race equality workshops'. It aims to get more black and minority ethnic groups involved in sports and to become more involved in decision-making, and provide more job opportunities through sports.

Intercultural innovators

A catalytic individual or group will often be at the heart of an intercultural initiative. 33 such people were interviewed in Bradford, Birmingham, Huddersfield, Leicester, London, Newcastle and Oldham to identify common characteristics. They fell into three broad types: artists, those involved in community development, including local politicians, and entrepreneurs. These people found it easier than most to cross cultural boundaries. They were adept at seeing their own culture as relative or composite and valued the different ways of doing things in other cultures. This openness allowed them to select and absorb elements of other cultures and to produce new ways of thinking and creating.

Many of these intercultural innovators, especially those of mixed race, often reported difficulties with racism or rejection while growing up, but this seemed to have translated into better motivation and resilience. Unorthodox educations were also common as they had often gained their life experience outside formal settings, for example through work rather than at university. They often described themselves as outsiders, mavericks and rebels on the margins of society.

Cities can nurture intercultural innovation by recognising diversity and drawing on its skills. They also need to eliminate racism and institutional lethargy and provide good access to funding and resources.

The need for new indicators

Currently, available data can describe the ethnic makeup of a community, but not the degree of interaction or co-operation.

The study presents an *isolation index* of 78 English boroughs, which is a quantitative measure of the likelihood of a person living next door to someone from a different background. However, further indicators are clearly needed to answer questions of how easily and frequently people from different ethnicities mix, how open a city is in terms of the institutional framework, business, civil society and public space, and the extent of intercultural co-operation and collaboration.

These questions can be partially answered by measures of, for example, intermarriage, multilingualism and crossover networks. Documentary indicators, such as the existence of a formal local authority strategy for intercultural diversity, are also telling.

To explore openness and interculturalism at an urban level, and test the assumptions of the indicators they devised, the researchers undertook a case study in Bristol, interviewing active or prominent people from a wide social spectrum. One finding was that among younger people, especially second and third generation immigrants, day-to-day involvements in work and play discourage segregation. Also, the creative industries and arts sectors are significant arenas where mixing occurs. The main conclusion, however, was that even though a city may not outwardly display any signs of ethnic tension or antipathy, a passive state of 'benign indifference' seems to be the UK default position and this is neither sufficient nor desirable if society is to make the most of diversity.

Policy implications

Building on these findings, the researchers draw out the following suggestions for policy action:

National government
Take a cross-departmental approach to community cohesion, include the achievement of intercultural engagement as a key target, adopt a strategy for productive diversity and devolve more powers and responsibilities to allow local government to act authoritatively on these matters.

Local government
Ensure wellbeing not only through protecting citizens from discrimination and harassment but also by making the most of the resources and the potential available in a diverse community, in particular through work with intercultural innovators. One approach could be to take advantage of Local Area Agreements and other discretionary regimes to pilot new projects to encourage intercultural innovation and ensure that more investment is made in gathering and interpreting knowledge to inform local decision-making. Grant regimes could favour projects which encourage mixing ahead of those which enshrine separation.

Other sectors
Professional associations, those working in education, planning and regeneration, the voluntary and faith sector, and business and economic development agencies should all consider their professional practice from within a diversity perspective and adapt accordingly.

About the project

The study drew on city-based case studies, thematic studies subjecting aspects of public and urban policy to analysis through an *intercultural lens* and in-depth interviews with 33 individual intercultural innovators in seven cities. These were Bradford, Birmingham, Huddersfield, Leicester, London, Newcastle and Oldham. Comparative analysis was conducted with researchers in Europe, North America and Australasia. A review of existing literature was also undertaken. The research was carried out over 15 months up to the end of 2005.

For further information

Further information about the study can be obtained at www.interculturalcity.com or from philwood@comedia.org.uk.

The full report, **Cultural diversity in Britain: A toolkit for cross-cultural co-operation** by Phil Wood, Charles Landry and Jude Bloomfield, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 9 781 85935 525 1, price £16.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

Printed copies from York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Road, Layerthorpe, York YO31 7ZQ, Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868 (please add £2.00 p&p per order).

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