



From reception to integration: The role of religious and non-religious groups

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During the last decades representatives of the world religions in Sweden have established different kind of networks on all levels. First of all for getting to know each other, to exchange on various actual topics of society life, and especially for creating projects for peaceful coexistence and against xenophobia and extremism.

Different governmental departments invited representatives of the networks on state, regional or local level, both for exchanging information and cooperation on actual questions, e.g. The Government's Council for Relations with Religious Communities, The Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, Coexist in Malmö and Open Skåne.

During the challenge of the reception of the refugees 2015/2016 and onwards the cooperation around various refugee related projects, and exchanges of experiences intensified at many levels. Moreover, the Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Police invited the religious representatives for exchanging information and cooperation concerning the reception of the refugees, integration questions and efforts against the increasing violent extremism. Extra state grants were supplied to the religious communities for strengthening their activities for integrating the refugees and for inter-religious projects.

The all over conclusion of these authorities was that the religious communities play a very important and unique role for guiding and supporting the refugees in their crisis situation. As the Swedish government stated in their budget bulletin in September 2017:

'The government is of the opinion that the religious communities have contributed to socially beneficial activities, and constitutes increasingly important actors for authorities and municipalities. The religious communities collect many individuals and fulfill important tasks in the local community. In addition, it became clear in the context of the reception of asylum seekers and new arrivals 2015/2016, where several religious communities played a crucial role, contributing to important socially useful activities. Interreligious cooperation at national level represents a good example of cooperation across the country.'

A practical example is a Buddhist Refugee project 'Infinite Compassion' that my Tibetan Buddhist Community started in the region of Örnsköldsvik in the north of Sweden. We received state grants of € 20 000 during 2016-2017. We cooperated e.g. with the Swedish Church, Multicultural center, International Woman Association and a Thai cultural association to help refugees to integrate in Swedish society in different ways. For instance by language, art and religion dialogue workshops, excursions in the region for experiencing

examples of typical Swedish lifestyle and environments, and a new project that was introduced to grow vegetables. This last example gave the immigrants the possibility to take up their skills of gardening, which they were used to in their home countries. At the same time they were supported by Swedish villagers and the Swedish Church who lent a piece of land to the project. During the work also other immigrants and Swedish villagers became socially involved. After harvesting they could sell some of the crops, and arranged a happy harvest celebration.

An excursion to the agricultural high school in the area had also an important impact on the project. The participants were introduced in the schools' subjects of education. A number of them decided to inscribe to some of the next courses. They communicated their wish to the Swedish labor office for permission. As the labor office was not aware of this possibility, it opened their eyes to recruit other unemployed refugees to start at this school.

Another example is the booklet 'Religion, religious freedom and religious communities' published in five languages by The Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities and The Swedish Inter-religious Council in cooperation. It has been distributed to all the refugee camps and other institutions and networks in Sweden. You can find it here:

http://www.sst.a.se/download/18.321bb7b715761866e674cc98/1474985104491/A5_Folde_r_12_sid_ok_EN_print.pdf

The following quote by Buddha illustrates the Buddhist' practitioners wish to share and develop a global responsibility for human rights, freedom and equality:

"Just like the whole ocean has one taste, the taste of salt,
likewise my whole doctrine and practice of discipline have one and the same taste,
the taste of freedom (*Uposatha Sutta, Udana 5.5.*)"

The above mentioned examples are still on a foundational level. Much more steps are necessary to lift up and include the potential of all minorities, aside of faith or other conviction. During the refugee crisis in Sweden there were many examples of Moslim aid communities not being allowed to enter the refugee camps and offer help, or receiving refugees in their mosques, while at the other hand Christian churches got permission. This is only one example of serious counter productivity, instead we should increase the cooperation between all actors in society for a successful integration.

What we can learn of our shared experiences concerning the refugee reception and integration is the need of a global responsibility to create a more all including CARING CULTURE.

Religious traditions have tools to cope with the challenges of living together, tools leading to the hearts of people to care each others' needs of well being on all levels.

In general we need to give extra attention to **the skill of social relations, of social competence** especially on all the educational levels, including children and adult training, and within all institutions. Whatever task or occupation we are engaged in could improve by developing a CARING CULTURE.

We are sending an appeal to each and every citizen in Europe to share joint efforts of caring each other in joyful harmony.

Buddhists like other colleagues here, believe that it is important to repeat that, because of economy, climate and wars (in other words political disorders) more people will continue to migrate. Everyone knows that. In this perspective, religions, schools of thoughts and intergovernmental organizations have to continue to involve themselves in building inclusive societies, because there is no alternative for living together now and in the future. Our common goal is a peaceful civil society.