



Alternative Voices on Integration project

Although we were originally funded only to do work in five countries, the IRR's alternative voices project provided essential tools and learning resources for a pan-European network which stretched from Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands and the UK (our original five countries) to Norway, Sweden, Ireland and Belgium. We have empowered groups on the ground by providing research, publications and learning seminars which have helped them articulate a different approach to integration, one based on defending the multicultural society, particularly at a time of rising nationalism, racism and attacks on cultural diversity.

We have provided first-rate research which has helped strengthen a rights-based approach to integration. In our publication, 'Alternative Voices on Integration in Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK' we provided a synopsis of government policies in the following areas: integration, racism and anti-racism, countering discrimination, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. We juxtaposed this with in-depth case studies of the work of groups on the ground, such as the Kanafani Intercultural Initiative (Austria), Social Forum of the Banlieues, Al Houda, DiverCités (France), Empowerment and Participation of Immigrants in east Germany project, Youth without Borders (Germany), Transnational Migrant Platform, Here to Stay (Netherlands), Bristol City Academy, Young Muslim Voices, Black Experience Archive Trust, Manifesta, Hidden Herstories (UK).

This major publication was launched at a seminar in Brussels chaired by Jean Lambert MEP and addressed by Mahinur Ozdemir MP, and from thereon was used as a tool through which policymakers and funders could be informed about the ways in which cultural racism was warping the integration debate. ECRI, the European Coalition of Cities against Racism, the Integration Office of Dublin City Council, the Association of Charitable Foundations, the Trades Union Congress, and the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe, Norwegian People's Aid, were, amongst those organisations who used and learnt from the report. As a non-Muslim organisation speaking out against Islamophobia, we have helped to foster greater awareness of the impact of Islamophobia, leading to some acknowledgement in governmental circles. In January 2011, the Swedish government announced that it was developing a strategy to counter Islamophobia. And German justice minister Sabine Leutheusser Schnarrenberger says Islamophobia is a serious problem, the first time this has been openly acknowledged in Germany.

One of our greatest successes was to pioneer a creative form of networking, based on loose and fluid structures, working on a variety of levels – local, national, European - trying to influence policy from below, but also deliberately targeting audiences outside the usual integration sector as a way of tackling integration issues by spreading out, and encouraging new sectors to get informed and involved. Thus our concluding seminar, brought together eighty representatives drawn from our own grassroots-based 'alternative voices' to funding organisations like the Open Society Foundation, to human rights groups like Amnesty International, to arts projects, documentary filmmakers academic institutions, anti-racist groups, youth projects and students.

Those who worked with us in alternative voices, as well as our external evaluators, told us that one of our greatest achievements was the creation of an 'active learning network'. They praised our project as innovative in its principled methodological commitment to people's voices, experiences and politics directing the work. The Alternative Voices on Integration report was seen to be a tool that could be used to cascade information up towards policy makers, shapers and implementers and down towards communities, 'civil rights' initiatives and campaigns.