SPHERES of EQUALITY

Criteria for Intervention and Communication to improve harmonious interaction in neighbourhoods

Summary

GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA — MINISTERIO DE INCLUSIÓN, SEGURIDAD SOCIAL Y MIGRACIONES

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Presentation

I am pleased to present the summary of the results of the study **"Spheres of equality: criteria for intervention and communication to improve harmonious interaction in neighbourhoods"**, elaborated by GEA21 under the coordination of the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE), and funded by the Secretariat of State for Migrations and the Ministry for Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations.

The study is based on prior research, "Perceptions, discourse and attitudes towards immigrants in a Madrid neighbourhood" (OBERAXE, 2019) which identified social groups, discourse, attitudes and dynamics related to the birth and spreading of discourse and action that counters harmonious interaction with foreign nationals, both immigrants and seekers of international protection alike.

This study's objective was to generate a methodology for local intervention to bolster action and communication initiatives to counter racism and xenophobia. With this aim, several local spheres were analysed and practices were documented that could be transferred to other localities. Specifically, three social areas were chosen with a view to furthering analysis of harmonious interaction locally. These three areas, dubbed "spheres of equality" are: schools, the streets and social services.

The public sphere is the underpinning of urban society where different people from different walks of life interact. School is a keystone in societies that believe in equal opportunities for all. Social policy is a typical source of redistribution in a Welfare State. In all of these three spheres, public opinion is generated and, together with other institutions, feeds deliberative democracy.

An analysis of these "spheres of equality" gives rise to a comprehensive interpretation of intolerant attitudes towards immigration and refugees, from which the proposals for policy, strategies and operational action appearing at the end of this document stem.

I am certain that this study, its results and its recommendations will be inspiring for public institutions, organizations and individuals responsible for and/or involved in immigration, inclusion and prevention policies and combating intolerance, and that they will guide us in enhancing harmonious interaction.

Hana Jalloul Muro
Secretary of State for Migrations

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INTRODUCTION

The project that we are presenting provides continuity to prior research "Perceptions, discourse and attitudes towards immigrants in a Madrid neighbourhood (OBERAXE, 2019)[1], identifying social groups, attitudes and dynamics related to the birth and spread of discourse and action hostile to harmonious interaction with foreign nationals, both immigrants and international protection seekers.

Using those results as a starting point, three public spheres were chosen to delve into further analysis of interaction at a local level: city streets, schools and the social welfare system. While the project worked in real environments in a district of Madrid, they were analysed as "standard contexts" because they also occur in many other places. The results and recommendations of this analysis may be used to guide the intervention of different public and private actors in enhancing and strengthening neighbourhoods.

The three areas cited, all favouring and sustaining harmonious interaction between strangers, have been called "spheres of equality" because they place the accent on what persons share as members of society, a common link that is not based on cultural identity or prior nationality, but rather on pluralism as access to these spheres cannot be excluded nor can their use be limited. They stand opposite to private spheres where one can choose to interact only with others who are similar.

The second trait these spheres have in common is that they are currently in crisis, or at least impoverished or eroded. The current trend is towards social isolation, the selection of controlled environments, and the segregation of social groups. Also, a trend can be observed in urban development towards uniform middle class neighbourhoods, separate from other more popular neighbourhoods that, with waning vigour, sustain immigrant integration. This can be observed in education, where in the name of families' freedom of choice, a gap is widening between public schools encompassing students of all different origins and those which select their students and avoid conflicts arising from cultural diversity.

1 http://www.mitramiss.gob.es/oberaxe/es/publicaciones/documentos/documento_0119.htm

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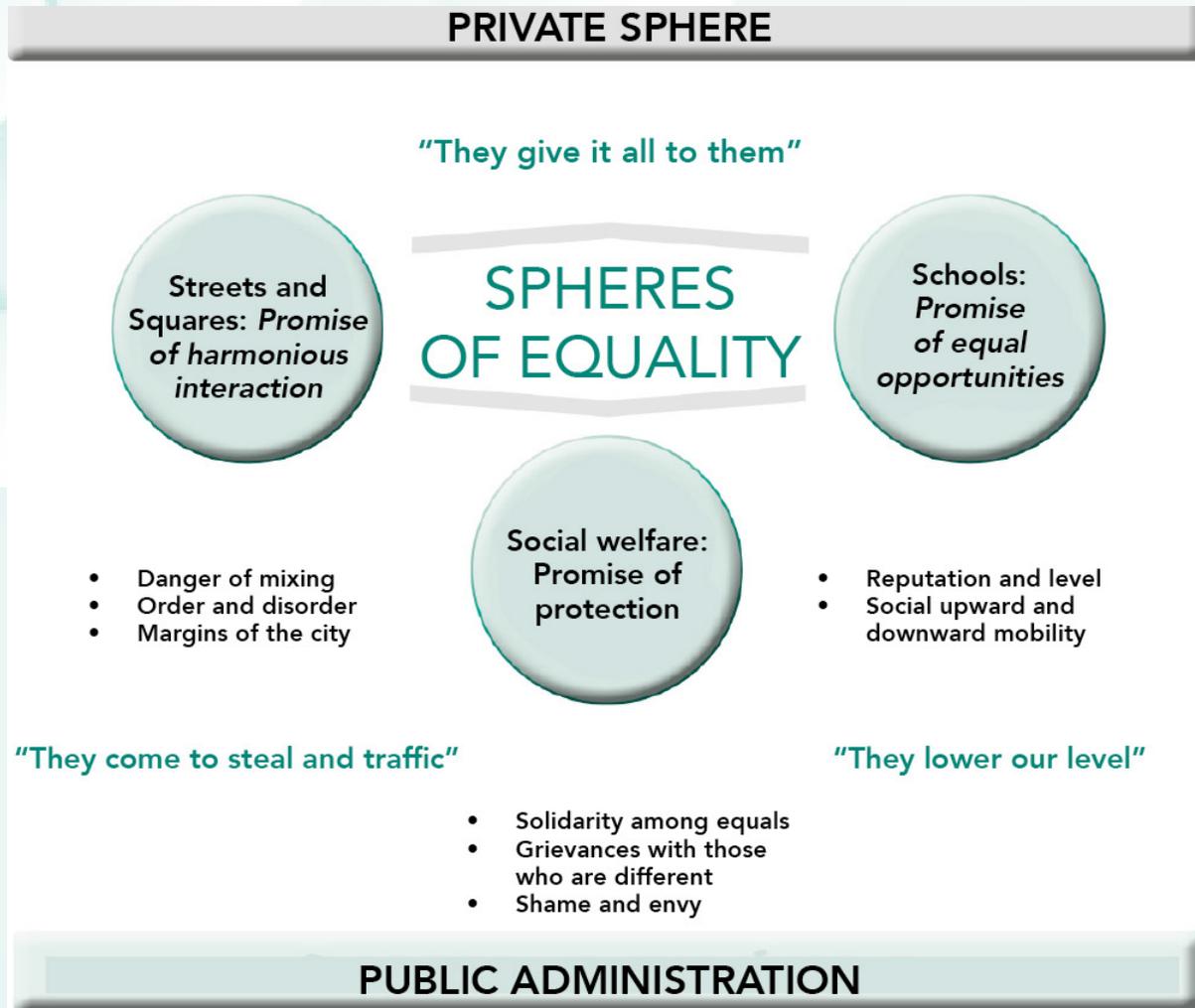to improve harmonious interaction in neighbourhoods | **Summary**

And this trend is expressed through the solidarity crisis that the social services are now experiencing. Their erosion comes hand in hand with criticism about whom welfare is delivered. Those competing for this assistance or those barely eking out a living above the poverty line and exclusion often express their feelings of a sense of unfairness that gives rise to racist or xenophobic discourse. The expression "they give it all to them" in reference to foreign nationals currently encapsulates the sense many people have of feeling unprotected. This translates into a call for priority to be given to Spaniards.

Eroded, these spheres of equality contract, and conflicts, which are inherent, seem to spiral out of control. People respond to this in two different ways: escape or control. The choice is either to escape to choose places (charter schools, neighbourhoods where income is uniform and there is private social protection and virtual networks of friends) or to call for order and discipline in the common spheres to make them less conflictual. Escape and control have a mutual knock-on effect. When middle and upper middle classes escape to spheres of life in common, those who cannot escape feel trapped and call for their spaces to at least be controlled and protected.

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PRIVATE SPHERE

"They give it all to them"

Streets and Squares: *Promise of harmonious interaction*

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Schools: *Promise of equal opportunities*

Social welfare: Promise of protection

- Danger of mixing
- Order and disorder
- Margins of the city

- Reputation and level
- Social upward and downward mobility

"They come to steal and traffic"   "They lower our level"

- Solidarity among equals
- Grievances with those who are different
- Shame and envy

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Graph 1. The spheres of equality and their risks

Graph 1 shows these three spheres' key positions in building democracy as they represent and express the promise of harmonious interaction, equal opportunities and solidarity between strangers. What follows is a concise explanation of the causes for their erosion and the role that public action can play to enhance harmonious interaction and curb the spread of the hostile fantasies described in the previously mentioned study "Perceptions, discourse and attitudes towards immigrants in a Madrid neighbourhood".

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CRISIS ON THE STREETS

In many neighbourhoods in Spain and around Europe, citizens express their feelings of insecurity on the streets, how they do not dare go down to the park, their perceptions of filth and neglect, and how they would leave if they could. Taking an example of an impoverished neighbourhood in Madrid with a high proportion of immigrants enables this crisis in the public spaces of popular neighbourhoods to be better understood.

A twofold phenomenon is underway where peoples' networks for sociability are waning and new situations and problems are arising that a fragile social fabric cannot withstand. An aging and impoverishing population coupled with an intense inflow of newcomers generating high turnover in housing units is breaking ties between neighbours as there is no time for new ties to take hold. Structures that bring people closer to each other, such as small shops, churches, associations, neighbourhood networks, customs and street festivities are becoming scarcer by the day, and even disappearing altogether. People feel insecure when they don't know their neighbours and, at the same time, a second generation of youth avails itself of the streets as the only place to live and express their cultural dilemmas. While these youth are a minority, for lack of any other integration structures aligned with their needs, for instance vocational training, employment or housing, they are highly visible and, despite themselves, incarnate the indiscipline that many residents perceive.

A sort of distortion of justice is generated. Structural problems (unemployment, lack of public housing, etc.) are interpreted as public space problems (i.e. filth, crime), and in turn problems out in the street are attributed to the presence of youth or unaccompanied minors, leading many residents to call for "tough action" to be taken.

Both of these phenomena, the weakening of bonds and the emergence of new social problems (gambling, gangs, apartments for doing drugs, etc.) generate increased tension in the face of a lack of structural policies fostering the rooting of the population and the endurance of local small businesses, neighbourhood associations, cultural venues and the like. Once a given threshold is crossed, a vicious circle is generated: those who have the means to do so move to other neighbourhoods, and the problems of harmonious interaction become further aggravated.

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CRISIS IN THE SCHOOLS

Something not very different is occurring in public schools. The public educational sphere continues to be one of the main "spheres of equality", a place where people of different origins and walks of life can meet, recognise each other as equals and learn to interact harmoniously. Currently, the integrating function that this sphere performed is being called into question through a process of virtual commodification of the public-school system. The chartering of private schools and mechanisms such as families' choice of schools has fostered an unequal distribution of students by origin and income levels. The Madrid Region, where the study was conducted, ranks first place in segregation not only nationwide, but throughout Europe. Yet it is no exception.

Rather than a balanced distribution enabling the entire system to take care of integrating minorities and absorb students from other countries and cultures, a high level of segregation in education has been allowed. This has generated stigmatised schools and bubble schools, both of which lose the virtue of social mixing and multiculturality.

Analysis of a Madrid secondary school showed how its bad reputation, based exclusively on Roma and foreign-born population in the student body, impacted its self-esteem and performance and how the teams of professionals and parent-teachers' association are struggling to turn this situation around. It also demonstrated the colossal work that public schools are doing for their neighbourhoods in the form of generating a sense of community, providing security for students whose families and lives are unstable, containing and solving conflicts of all sorts that go beyond the strict confines of the school, and striving to fulfil the promise of equal opportunity, at least within the school walls.

The student body, the families and the teaching staff recognise that school is a space for equality, and many call the school their second home. Far from avoiding 'social' problems, these problems are part and parcel of its educational work, and the school accompanies the students and their families in solving these problems. In a precarious social environment, the school works as an institution that takes in those who are adrift. This is what public education is about.

Recognising the work and the function of those who are making these schools a foundation for neighbourhoods seems to be a question of justice. These schools stand as indispensable, beaconing examples of harmonious interaction and the integration of a diverse population, taking on the conflicts and problems that this entails. In the recommendations drawn from this analysis, the first measure is to endow them with the resources and recognition that the entire community deserves.

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SOCIAL PROTECTION AND XENOPHOBIC AND RACIST DISCOURSE

This third ambit is the remaining "sphere of equality" in crisis. Local social policies, that is, the distribution of social welfare to cover unexpected needs provided by town and city councils and regions to ensure access to certain goods and prevent social exclusion, is the issue that stirs the most anger among those interviewed. Among the residents in the neighbourhoods and on the social media, the idea is circulating that immigrants and refugees receive most of the welfare that is denied to autochthonous locals.

Behind the anger lies the hard reality where scarcity and potential discretional nature of welfare and its blurry boundaries help generate a breeding ground for this. In the words of the FOESSA report, the protection referred to by those complaining falls into the category of "low intensity rights" generally under local jurisdiction and not attached to an individual's tax contribution. In a society like Madrid's where 20% of the least wealthy have lost 30% of their income during the economic crisis, it is no wonder that discouragement and rancour have been bred among all of the vulnerable individuals competing for scarce assistance, for instance among the working poor who consider that not even holding employment has kept their risk of exclusion at bay.

In order to explain the current conflict, it must be stated that social policies do not redistribute wealth but rather nuance poverty. These policies grant assistance and services to only a small portion of those who need them. The criteria used for extreme need and emergency often lead to foreign nationals' receiving this assistance given their weaker position in society. In any event, discrimination or exclusion of those who need financial, employment or housing assistance stems from this very insufficiency of resources.

This "sphere of equality" and eroded and insufficient solidarity, meant to absorb the emergency and prevent abject poverty, does not act as a solid poverty reduction policy. Instead, its current characteristics undermine solidarity and generate shame and envy, thus feeding racist and xenophobic discourse.

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CONCLUSIONS

This analysis has delved into the current state of three "spheres of equality", public space, schools and social welfare, thus showing, through concrete examples, how their weakness –or rather their erosion- triggers or harbours xenophobic or racist discourse. The range of tones varies from discourse about the dangers of unaccompanied minors to rumours about the reputation and the level of schools, to the aggressiveness of grievances spread across social media about welfare given to foreign nationals. At the root of speech that runs against harmonious interaction lies these spheres in crisis: neighbourhoods that cannot sustain integration due to their eroded structures and networks; schools struggling to integrate students who are new or come from other cultures while the poor school reputation undermines this work; social services and welfare that, despite itself, feeds a feeling of resentment based on grievance.

This study has attempted to illustrate how this erosion of harmonious interaction stems from deep structural causes. Society, living under the pressure of economic competition and characterised by the breaking of traditional bonds of neighbourhood, class or nation, cannot be sustained by broken and insufficient public policy. These problems crudely manifest themselves out on the streets, in schools, and in the social services, and at times some interpret their own discomfort as a result of too much change in the social make-up of their neighbourhood, their school, or of the presence and competition posed by newcomer communities.

The study's basic conclusion is that people and groups are able to solve their problems and address their conflicts, within bounds, provided that their possibilities for generating cohesion are not outstripped. Public administrations do not have to solve minor conflicts between neighbours or reinvent social ties, but rather deliver structural public policies that strengthen spheres of equality.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The following lines of public intervention have proven themselves to be essential as an underpinning for harmonious interaction in neighbourhoods:

- Urban planning and housing policies that allow new and old inhabitants alike to become rooted and live stable lives in their communities.

- Business policies that enable small shops, which are basic hubs for interaction, to survive.

- Education policies that do not segregate by income or origin and that recognise the work of public schools and at the same time build bridges between education and employment for all youth –foreign and locally born alike- who are otherwise left by the wayside.

- Sufficiently universal and well sustained social policies so as to prevent exclusion and combat poverty without selecting or stigmatising their recipients.

- Communications policies that show respect towards those individuals, institutions and neighbourhoods that sustain integration and defend solidarity by recognising different social positions and the local culture at the same time.

In addition to these policy recommendations, it is important to be mindful of some other measures targeted at actors in the field, social services, NGOs, associations, infrastructure, local police and so forth.

- The main recommendation for action of local actors is for them to be able to thrive and work, that is, for public administrations to support and/or finance social work, neighbourhood and emigrants' associations, popular schools and athenaeums, proximity policing, NGOs working on minority integration, and so forth.

- Public infrastructure plays a key role in integration and serves as a meeting point in the community in addition to covering sectoral needs. In order to fulfil their public role, that is, to serve as hubs for policies that do not merely dispense services for individual users but foster harmonious interaction, the role of this infrastructure must

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be revisited and granted the time, space and political support to be up to the task. Centres for the elderly, health centres, libraries, and sports complexes all weave vast networks that allow for discussion, encounters and mutual support. But this does not occur without deliberate, active policies.

- The role of all of these actors is particularly one of thinking through the dilemmas involved in multiculturality and how social conflict is expressed. They can perform their role by offering opportunities to express these conflicts, by putting forward local solutions (as the educational community continually does) or by being able to channel the problem to another instance where it can be solved. The overload faced by social service providers makes an essential task impossible to perform.

- The social sector therefore must be reinforced with the human and other resources, rooting out precariousness and putting stable teams in place to perform the function of helping individuals to understand their situations and dilemmas and promote action to improve their neighbourhoods. Thought and action must come hand in hand.

- Lastly, social actors must rethink the ideas and the ethics they communicate. The discourse they convey is not always understood by those groups suffering from the most difficulties in harmoniously interacting with those from other cultures, i.e. the working class in crisis, the 'fallen', the elderly, the isolated, etc. It is essential to listen to their complaints and fears – which generally do not have cosmopolitan overtones- and place them in their context rather than negating or frowning upon them. It is recommended that action in the face of this discourse be prioritised (in other words seeing what people actually do, not what they say), and that incentives be provided for those who, although they may complain, remain in their public schools, in their neighbourhoods, in their apartment buildings in crisis, and that respect be shown for their individual and group efforts to make a way for themselves.

In short, these "spheres of equality" should be strengthened to allow residents and community associations to solve their conflicts and problems for themselves and generate new urban cultures and new ways for people who are different to collaborate and respect one another.