

Building organic capacities: The pepper in the melting pot

Maiada Gassan Hadaia

Commission for Development Studies at the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation and Research
Vienna, Austria

Practical background. “Researchers on the Move. Intercultural Dimensions in Sciences and Humanities” is a project which facilitates critical discourse about interculturality in sciences and humanities and at the same time creates an opportunity for students/researchers from industrialized and developing countries with different backgrounds and nationalities to meet and exchange their views.

The project started in 2008 with a weblog¹ where students/researchers from Kenya, Nigeria, Palestine, Eritrea and Austria have since been sharing articles as part of a wider network of social media. Radio programs with interviews, reports and public opinion surveys constitute another activity of this work with the intention to communicate intercultural and development matters to a broader public. Finally, three workshops further developed and addressed challenges on intercultural relations in international cooperation. Researchers from Uganda, Bulgaria, India, Austria and Argentina were invited to share their personal experiences with interculturality during their studies or work abroad. Not the least their intercultural experiences are imbedded in a historical gap between the so called “North-South” in particular facing unlike challenges in (higher) education and research.

As part of this project students/researchers and partners from the KEF worked together on developing a better method of understanding interculturality and development matters from examples of international cooperation.

Research background. Communication between members of different cultures is a global-historical inevitability and a challenge of every day life and therefore a significant concern in our today’s world. However we still have need of substantial insights into

conditions of inter- or transcultural communication work. Power relations due to “(under)development” such as the gap between “North-South” in (higher) education and research particularly are often neglected.

The questions discussed in our platforms are not only about respect for different cultures and in particular between students/researchers from the so called South. But also with focus on questions on development issues and their ties to a better understanding for the living or working conditions in particular of student/researchers from developing countries. Development matters such as development aid and cooperation, poverty, corruption, mobility in and for (higher) education and research and at the same time this working together for solutions with respect to the knowledge of the people from these concerned regions as a strengthening of intercultural relations.

Aims. The project intends to offer virtual and real spaces for critical discourse about interculturality in sciences and humanities for students/researchers from the so called “North-South” with different backgrounds and nationalities to meet and exchange their views and to build networks. Examples of how intercultural dialogue and development matters in particular in (higher) education and research between students/researchers from industrialized and developing countries can work are to support groups and subject matters which may otherwise not gain much publicity and which are until now under-represented or not at all represented in the mainstream. Further too definitely and purposely prohibit power relations which are historically narrowed in international development but go far beyond for example in colonization, such as racist, sexist, fascist subject matters subject matters which violate human dignity to raise awareness and to sensitise a broader public.

¹ A web log is a type of website, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as pictures or video.

Main contribution. It has become the norm that students/researchers travel and work internationally. However, Austria has not proven to be the best example in Europe in terms of its treatment of and policies towards people from different backgrounds and nationalities. Considering this apparent contradiction one might ask: Can Austria be considered as an attractive place for scientific cooperation? What are the living and working conditions for students/researchers in Austria? The past few years have shown that there is only a very limited level of dialogue possible in Austria about some of its most pressing issues.

How and where might science and research position itself with respect to students/researchers from Africa, Asia or Latin America and to development matters as a ground for the so called gap between North and South?

Implications. In the course of this project two workshops and four radio broadcasts were organized. The workshops were an opportunity for representatives from different scientific disciplines as well as from different countries and backgrounds to meet and discuss prejudices, stereotypes, and barriers from their very personal experiences and to discuss potential solutions towards a more respectful way of life in our society.

These events facilitated an exchange of experiences and networking among invited participants representing different stakeholder groups about intercultural dialogue and questions of western and non western ways of approaching for example (higher) education and research. Respect and understanding of each other were also topics and how individuals can connect voluntarily to such “idealistic” projects to open new horizons of tolerance.

Examples of unequal partnerships

This historical gap, which is for example expressed in eurocentric and hegemonic behaviour on different levels of life, makes it rather challenging to harmonise a true inter-cultural progress. I would like to cite one intellectual and educational example given during a workshop on interculturality

in Vienna (see figure 1), when one of our invited researchers from Uganda, Helen Nakimbugwe, talked about her experience on research cooperations between the North and the South:

“Partners in the North tend to come with an attitude that they know better. It is true that they usually have wider experience, but the local people know their circumstances better. What they read in books about localities usually needs adjustments in order to suit what is on the ground.”



Figure 1: Workshop on interculturality in Vienna

Communicating interculturality

Communication between members of different cultures is a global-historical inevitability and a test in every day life and therefore an important concern in our today's world. However we still have need of substantial insights into conditions of inter- or transcultural communication work. Power relations due to the historical catch-up for development, expressed in the social, economical and cultural gap between “North-South” in particular in (higher) education and research are often neglected. The questions discussed on our platforms are not only about research and education or respect for different cultures and in particular between students/

researchers from the so called South, but they also focus on urgent development issues and their ties to a better understanding for the living and working conditions of disadvantaged humans worldwide, in particular in the poorest regions of our globe, including students/researchers from developing countries in Austria.

Development matters such as development aid and cooperation, poverty, migration, brain drain and brain waste and mobility in higher education and research are important topics in our project and were addressed at the workshop in Salzburg (see figure 2). At the same time this collaboration for solutions with respect to the knowledge of the people from these concerned regions can be understood as a strengthening of intercultural relations. Not least this project has been developed from the opposite premise: to spread awareness about cultural differences, about ways of knowing and learning and against a patiently changing face of racism.



Figure 2: Workshop on interculturality in Salzburg

Networking and exchange

The project intends to offer virtual and real spaces for critical discourse about interculturality in sciences and humanities for students/researchers from the so called “North-South” with different backgrounds and nationalities to meet and exchange their

views and to build networks. Examples of how intercultural dialogue and development matters in particular in (higher) education and research between students/researchers from industrialized and developing countries can work are to support groups and subject matters which may otherwise not gain much publicity and which are until now under-represented or not at all represented in the mainstream. This project intends further more to definitely and purposely prohibit power relations which are historically narrowed in international development but go far beyond colonization, such as racist, sexist, fascist subject matters subject matters which violate human dignity to raise awareness and to sensitize a broader public.

Interculturality in sciences and humanities

It has become the norm that students/researchers travel and work internationally. However, Austria has not proven to be the best example in Europe in terms of its treatment of and policies towards people from different backgrounds and nationalities. Considering this apparent contradiction one might ask: Can Austria be considered as an attractive place for scientific cooperation? What are the living and working conditions for students/researchers in Austria? The past few years have shown that there is only a very limited level of dialogue possible in Austria about some of its most pressing issues. How and where might science and research position itself with respect to students/researchers from Africa, Asia or Latin America and to development matters as a ground for the so called gap between North and South?

The idea for the project was developed during the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008. The background of this

project forms the discontent with the way images of people from so called developing countries are presented in mass media and the way the public perceives them, this concerns further an ethnocentric and paternalistic view about people in education and research from so called developing countries, not only represented in mass media, but also in the minds of university representatives, students, researchers, educators, and so on. Some common prejudices are:

- “they come to learn from us”,
- “they need our knowledge and technology”
- “they support the brain drain in their own countries”
- “they take our jobs”
- “they should return to develop their people”

Without to make the effort to question the added values like what can we learn from each other? How can we as students/researchers work together to solve global problems in intercultural teams, get a good understanding for each other/about each other’s different backgrounds? Without the respect of different ways of knowing and learning and understanding the world, in other words with respect to our different cosmologies, intercultural competences would be ineffective.

Stereotyping, racism, exclusion or paternalistic behavior is essential to considerate in intercultural issues. Otherwise how to build so called “organic capacities” – or in other words how to find the right ingredients and spices to put into the melting pots, so that everyone likes this delicious taste?

This is the intention of the project “Researchers on the Move. Intercultural Dimensions in Sciences and Humanities through the activities we organized.

Here I would like to draw your attention to two questions I liked most as outcome of our discussions and postings in the weblog and as discussion for our continuing involvements within this topic in the future:

1. Why pointing out differences between people and environments rather than common aspects?
2. Why discussing cultural and not human issues?

Organic capacities

In the course of this project three workshops and five radio broadcasts were organized. The workshops were an opportunity for representatives from different scientific disciplines as well as from different countries and backgrounds to meet and discuss prejudices, stereotypes, and barriers from their very personal experiences and to discuss potential solutions towards a more respectful way of life in our society.

These events facilitated an exchange of experiences and networking among invited participants representing different stakeholder groups about intercultural dialogue and questions of western and non western ways of approaching for example (higher) education and research. Respect and understanding of each other were also topics and how individuals can connect voluntarily to such “idealistic” projects to open new horizons of tolerance.

In our Workshops we worked with creative methods like the “World Café”. Following the two keynote speeches of our invitees from Argentina and Uganda, Alicia Cabezudo and Helen Nakimbugwe, two rounds of the “World Café” took place. Every participant of the workshop was invited to join a group and discuss with others. After a few minutes everybody was invited to change another group.

One of the topics was about the added value of intercultural research teams and the potential of academically trained persons with migration background in Austria. The goals were to develop a clearer picture on synergistic effects regarding intercultural communication demonstrating the potential of interculturality in sciences and humanities and building networks between different actors attending the workshop.

The topic of the first world café was: What is my personal experience regarding the subject presented? State some similarities and differences. The participants of the workshop discussed this topic in changing groups and listed key words on table sized paper sheets. These are some of the outcomes of the discussion:

- acceptance is the first step
- cultures are values and we have to respect others cultures
- power relations “western world” and “countries of the south”
- widening views, raising more different questions
- need of new people living without stereotypes
- a gap between belief and the action of being open and intercultural
- society and media influence our responses to intercultural situations
- language is important but there is more: understand the universe a certain language respects
- to have the courage to raise your hand (braking barriers)
- communication as a key to acceptance in teams
- more migration can potentially lead to more intercultural gathering and working together
- enclosed society – geschlossene Gesellschaft
- different social backgrounds hence different understanding of the same issue

- conflicts/differences do not always have to be perceived as negative or positive

Dr. Ekaterina Dimitrova, another guest referee on the second workshop concluded the matter with the following words: “Intercultural communication always includes not simply scientific issues, but practical human aspirations as well. The two modes form some kind of personal researcher’s file and the ways these issues are treated may say a lot about us as humanity.

Literature

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Internet:

- Researchers on the Move. Intercultural Dimensions in Sciences and Humanities
<http://www.forscherinnen-unterwegs.net>
- Radio ORANGE 94.0 <http://o94.at>
- KEF Commission for Development Studies
<http://www.kef-online.at>

Biography

Maiada Gassan Hadaia was born in 1976 in Sofia. Since 2008 she has been project assistant for the Commission for Development Studies (KEF) at the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education & Research and writing her master thesis at the institute for International Development at the University of Vienna. Since 1999 she has been engaged as a radio journalist and has provided trainings in radio journalism. Her fields of interest are: International migration, transculturality, global development and learning, and gender issues. Since 2007 she has been member of the Austrian Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Her work has much in common with the transdisciplinary background of the cAIR 10 conference. She tries to bridge the gap between research and practice and the rising importance of inter-, trans- or multiculturalism in national and international education and research.