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POLICY BRIEF

Building City Identities in Contexts of Diversity

Summary

Migration and mobility are central to the development of cities around the world. Cities have always been dynamic places where translocal networks converge and where rapid social, cultural, spatial and demographic transformations occur. Cities offer numerous opportunities to new migrants, while migrants contribute to diverse sectors of the urban economy and to the social and cultural vibrancy of cities. Local leadership is faced with the challenge to ensure that this relationship is kept positive by creating a city identity that reflects the dynamism of cities, that is socio-economically inclusive and that understands diversity in positive terms. This identity must develop through good practice in the spaces of everyday urban life such as schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods. The media has a crucial and active role to play in shaping public perceptions to ensure that in this age of globalization, mobility and migration are understood as the norm and vital to cities and their development.

Context

Cities have long been zones of encounter, growth and creativity. In the contemporary context of globalization and urbanization, migration and mobility are ever more central to the growth of cities around the world. While internal migration flows may be more prominent in some cities, and international migration flows in others, the opportunities and challenges for migrants and local government are similar. Migration provides rich opportunities for local development in economic, social and cultural terms. It can also create challenges for city governments as they adapt to managing new forms of diversity.

Making the most of migrants' contributions to urban life and protecting their fundamental human rights depends on keeping public perceptions of migration and diversity positive. In this regard, building an inclusive city identity is important. This should consider that cities are not static or bounded entities and that identity is a process, shaped and reshaped as new people arrive in the city.

Building city identities that reflect this dynamism would thus ensure that people of diverse backgrounds are not perceived as outsiders or threats, but as co-citizens with a right to the city and with important contributions to make (UNDP, 2009). Cities have the potential to offer, in tangible ways, hospitality and a sense of belonging to marginal groups, including migrants in vulnerable situations. For instance, public services, cultural, transnational and faith-based networks and non-governmental organizations found in cities offer undeniable support to migrants. City governments can make concrete contributions to developing and sustaining these services and networks. This in turn will foster a sense of urban citizenship, which involves a shared sense of belonging, responsibility and common purpose among urban inhabitants (Holston, 1996).

City Identities in Practice
Cities of sanctuary or refuge, cosmopolitan or global cities are some of the identities created by cities to promote an ethos of urban hospitality. The media plays a role in distilling these identities in the public imagination, yet without always going beyond rhetoric or image to reflect on how city identities work in practice. Identity is created through practice and is something that inhabitants of a city ought to embody in their everyday lives if it is to be meaningful (de Certeau, 1984). This kind of embodied practice occurs in schools, civic spaces, neighbourhood marketplaces and work environments. For instance, by making education accessible to all and sensitizing schoolteachers to the diversity that students bring, young people can learn to relate to difference as the norm in their everyday classroom encounters. In cities such as Toronto, Barcelona and Auckland, public libraries are easily accessible and cater, through a range of activities, to a plural urban citizenry (Cities of Migration, 2012).

Local governments therefore need to invest resources and to work at a grassroots level to encourage good practice and to build an inclusive city identity. Inclusion refers to the equality of opportunities, where one can participate in city life regardless of one's background. This is important when considering that as mobility brings prosperity and growth, new socio-economic inequalities are also created. Cities attract migrants in highly paid sectors of the economy, as well as migrants in low-wage and informal sectors of the economy, in highly precarious conditions (Wills et al., 2012). In order to tackle such inequalities in a sustainable manner, a

revised notion of prosperity is needed which moves beyond a narrow economic understanding of the term to consider social and human development concerns (UN-HABITAT, 2012).

There are examples to demonstrate how inclusive city identities are put into practice through the creation of targeted policies. One is the London Living Wage Campaign, which aims to guarantee that workers earn a decent wage that will enable them to provide for their families and to live in the city with dignity. This affects migrants who are significantly represented in the lowest paid sectors of the urban economy. Other cities are still in the process of establishing migration as a policy issue. The city of São Paulo recently created a new municipal post to address the concerns of new migrants arriving in precarious conditions. In its preliminary steps, participatory meetings were organized in different neighbourhoods where migrants and the wider public had a say in what forms municipal support should take. Proposals highlighted the need for Portuguese language-learning opportunities, employment support and training public service providers on migrants' rights and on managing new kinds of diversity. Intercultural celebrations in public spaces are also encouraged to demonstrate how migrants – particularly those portrayed in a poor light in the media – contribute in multifaceted ways to the economic and cultural life of the city. São Paulo follows a model similar to that successfully adopted by the Barcelona City Council's Interculturality Plan, whereby years of community consultation led to the emergence of a new vision of the city based on 'positive interaction, contact, dialogue and mutual familiarity' (Barcelona City Council, 2009).

Communications and Public Perceptions

Cities are more than just geographically bounded containers of populations. Perceiving cities as nexus points of difference, shaped and sustained through mobilities and encounters, can improve public perceptions of migration and diversity. Shaping public perceptions involves engaging diverse forms of media.

An example of a project, which aimed to shape public perceptions on migration in a positive way, is 'Inside Out', a participatory photography project led by civil society groups in Singapore. Migrants were trained in basic photography skills and given the opportunity to document their everyday lives with cameras. The project culminated in an exhibition, with local press coverage, and expressed the personal stories of migrants and their perceptions of the city. The aim was to bridge the social and spatial distance between the local population and low-income migrant workers who are often housed on the margins of the city, isolated from the rest of the population. Similar initiatives have since been launched with the assistance of local government and intergovernmental agencies in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok.

The mainstream and social media also have a crucial role to play in building a city identity, disseminating accurate information, consistent positive messages about migration, as well as actively working to improve public perceptions. Barcelona's Anti-Rumour Strategy has been cited widely as an example of active citizen engagement in partnership with local government to combat stereotypes about migrants through anti-rumour agents, comic strips, You Tube, television and radio programmes. In London, The New Londoners is an online news platform created to foster understanding between 'communities old and new', featuring stories that celebrate the positive contributions of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Research has indicated that a strong and resilient local media is required to stand up to national-level debates on migration, which often take a negative tone (Collett and Gidley, 2012). Since publics are plural, differentiated strategies are also required. For example, overt attempts to shift opinions might be considered offensive to some groups and thus counterproductive (Collett and Gidley, 2012).

The social media has the potential to actively shape public perceptions, yet the democratization of the media has also seen the rise of hate speech and xenophobia online. These trends, which may worsen public perceptions, can be actively counteracted with positive messages that promote social cohesion in contexts of diversity. In Nairobi, for example, citizens used the social media to speak out against the mass arrests of Somali refugees in the Eastleigh neighbourhood of the city. In Morocco, a recent campaign 'My Name is Not Negro' ('*Massmytich Azzi*'), launched by an anti-racism collective, directly engaged traditional and social media to inform the public about the migrant rights as cities in Morocco deal with new inflows of migrants.

Other creative means of communication have proven successful in conveying key messages. In Mumbai, non-governmental organizations and migrant groups use street theatre to raise awareness about health and education to recent arrivals of migrants in the settlement of Dharavi. The potential of this medium could be harnessed to reach a wider public and to shed positive light on the everyday cosmopolitanism that characterizes Mumbai in a context where certain groups try to suppress it.

Conclusion

Cities across the world develop differently and have distinct social, cultural and economic characteristics; these local specificities do indeed matter (Robinson, 2006; Balbo, 2005). Yet what unites cities in different parts of the world is recognition that they are all dynamic, dependent on mobility for their development. Accordingly, they transform into global reference points where transnational and translocal networks –both economic and cultural – converge (Saunders, 2010).

City governments that acknowledge and build on this reality are far more likely to benefit from mobility and diversity. Likewise, city identities that are created in and through everyday practice are more likely to succeed than those imposed in a top-down or static manner. The media has an active role to play in building an identity whereby migration and diversity are normalised and understood as core features of the world's cities.

Recommendations

Strategy

- Create a strategy of good practice and build a city identity that is informed by values promoting hospitality, inclusion, interaction and dialogue.

- Develop a communications strategy, which actively engages different types of media with a view to building strong local media. This strategy will have to bear in mind multiple publics and target audiences.

Funds

- Prioritize and invest funds to build this city identity and to develop measures that tackle socio-economic inequalities and promote equal opportunities. Resources are required for training schemes, for support to migrants in finding employment and housing, language classes and multilingual access to public services and information.

Practices

- Support civil society organizations and migrant groups in their grassroots initiatives to change public perceptions and to improve the material conditions of life for marginal groups.

- Create accessible and inclusive public spaces that enable and encourage intercultural encounters, while also allowing improvised public spaces of conviviality to exist. The Corniche in Beirut, for instance, is a vibrant public space where multiple publics interact and where the city's social and spatial boundaries are crossed (Harb, 2013).

- Learn from best practices in how diversity is lived and managed, paying attention to practices at neighbourhood and citywide levels.

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