

Global Dialogue Foundation Unity in Diversity - OPEN FORUM

Strengthening the role of communities, business, non-governmental organisations in cross-cultural understanding and building inclusive societies

6 October 2011 - Northcote Town Hall

Transcript of President Sampaio's speech as delivered UN High Representative, former President of Portugal

Good afternoon to everyone. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm very very happy to be here in this magnificent hall. It took me quite a lot of time to get here because of the road being under repair. As a former Mayor, I know what that means. Citizens of those communities normally hate works going on, but then they love it afterwards when its better. So, I hope it will be better in a few weeks time.

I'm happy for this opportunity again to visit your country. It's about the 4th time in different capacities that I've been here. I'm happy to do it today in this specific capacity, which was outlined by H.E. the Mayor and by my previous friend and speaker. I really wanted to now in this capacity, have a more direct sense of how your multicultural society is adapting to the new challenges posed of course by our age of globalisation, migration and cultural anxieties.

Let me first of all, commend the fact that Australia merits its pioneering achievements in building a truly multicultural society, combining diversity and social cohesion and having a vibrant and cultural and excellent economic performance and of course a very active sport performance.

These are I would say markers of your success and of course Nobel prizes appearing at the same time, so it shows how a society which was built step-by-step with many people coming from many places, this is a measure of success which I think should be, in my view, dealing with these matters throughout the world, much better known because this is in a way, apart from the problems that every country has, it shows the success it shows the determination, it shows the willingness and it shows social cohesion which I think are essential.

So, I'm here to learn this time. I'm here to discuss. I was fortunate to have the possibility, although arriving late, to hear about some of your communities and associations dealing with these kinds of problems and I am happy that public policies like education, housing, youth policies, immigration programs that you have been implementing are in-fact realising this sort of important dream.

I think that there is in this country a unique, a key in terms of multiculturalism. It has an outstanding reservoir of expertise, experience and practices and I think that we should know better and to enrich these debates among the members of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

By the way, we more or less 130 members at the moment. 100 being members of the United Nations. The others are international organisations and as it has been said, the necessity of in-fact understanding what civil society can bring to public policies and what

public policies can bring to advance civil society diagnosis and the feeling that it detects at the various levels, namely at the local level.

As a former mayor, which was probably one of the most exciting things of my political life. I'm a lawyer by profession. Many years as a lawyer. I was a member of Parliament and then I decided to be a candidate for the Lisbon post of Mayor. It was a very tough election. Five years there gave me an extraordinary experience on how to in fact discuss a big investment in the morning and deal with multicultural issues in the evening. In the middle of all of that, trying to deal with slums or trying to deal with something like sky-scrapers or the equivalent to that in a smaller sense.

So, I think that, if I may say so in all sincerity, I think you may be, in the sense that you have all the right to be proud of living in a highly cohesive and inclusive society made up of cultural and ethnic diverse population where all as individuals, communities and cultures are equally treated having the same rights and responsibilities and enjoying this basic thing which is trying to enjoy equal opportunities - that is a very big challenge in life that is something one fights for and to have it around the corner, provided you have the merit to get there - is something which I think is fundamental.

I think that the combination of equal cultural circumstances which excludes hierarchy of cultures and promotes dialogue as a tool for transformation and equal opportunities are essential to this success.

Now ladies and gentlemen, what is the main question in my view at this precise moment having travelled in many places from north south east west, middle east, asia, africa, northern europe, etc., Now here, before in different capacities in asia pacific continents, how can one keep these patterns in line with the changes that are shaping the 21st century?

The question is how in fact to adapt multiculturalism to these new challenges with which we are faced with. Well, of course in terms of the transformation of the economic system which make all manufacturing economies shift into knowledge driven economies, the case of Europe, of course the case of Canada, America and indeed Australia.

In terms of a cultural make up of societies which is changing and becoming ever more diverse, challenging the sense of belonging which we are used to and this is a very important chief point in characteristic, but there are challenges to that and also, what kind of mission in terms of community and the collective mission is one confronted with in the 21st century.

In terms of course of public perceptions and narratives of local diversity that are being reshaped and by namely the global communication we know all about, or at least you know more than I do.

So the current debate on multiculturalism, you are aware of this debate. This debate is with very high temperature in some countries in Europe, is occurring in many societies.

What does it reflect?

It reflects that these changes and expresses the need to address these new challenges and to answer something which I think is important. Not to ignore the growing anxiety in

some societies that multiculturalism raises and reframes and reinforces this agenda of multiculturalism in terms of policies and its institutions.

Multiculturalism policies include indeed a certain migration policy - migration or integration programs. I don't think that's all because multiculturalism is a two-way street and this I think is very very important.

It also means strong and very inclusive formal and informal education on valuing cultural diversity and reinforcing inclusive attitudes and actions. It involves a strong system that enshrines equality namely through a social inclusion agenda that takes into consideration cultural and racial issues and a culture of tolerance and dialogue that promotes social and community engagement and prevents intolerance, prejudice and discrimination.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, the challenges of this century we are just beginning are certainly not all the same in different countries. There are many many differences. But there are common threads I would like to underline and the new technologies of communication are making us live under the same roof. We can be anywhere at the same time to a certain extent.

This also means a sense of cultural and affiliation that people have in this increasingly global world is much more interconnected and highly complex than before. This means that multiculturalism goes more into intercultural. But I don't want to quibble about words.

What I want to stress here, is that although solutions to problems are always local and this I think is important to understand. I'm not speaking to this audience, I'm in a way echoing my past experiences around the world and I insist, and solutions to problems are always local and differ from country to country.

I believe, I strongly believe that there is a common reflection to be made on multiculturalism as a core feature of all societies. We live under the same roof. There is always this search for human dignity, for common values and we need to defend the core principals of multiculturalism and reinvigorate public awareness and commitment to some of its core duties - education of course, welfare and cultural services.

Just as education is not bad merely because some people cannot read, multiculturalism did not fail just because there are problems to solve. There are always problems to solve. We're always inside social, economic, environment processes and especially in this kind of situation, this is a long ongoing process, ladder by ladder. Ladder up the ladder. So in any case, much can be done to reflect on challenges ahead and challenges to be addressed and made.

This is why I'm here, to stimulate really, I don't think it's necessary, but anyway to stimulate the participation of Australia and its vibrant civil society in the Alliance of Civilizations. Australia has been a relevant member of the Alliance and I had the necessity to come here, a very rewarding necessity, to say your experience has to be more translated, has to be more communicated, has to, not to be copied because nothing is copied in this field, but at least to be understood, better known because it's not known as I think it should be and it has all the merits to be known and also faced the problems as you have been facing throughout the last decades.

Not only because of course the needs to adapt and the needs to respond, but also because participation and engagement in community service are two of the indicators of

the success of multiculturalism, but also if we want to reinvigorate, much must be done in terms of participation, forms of citizenship take-up and social innovation.

The UN Alliance of Civilizations has been promoting national and regional action in this regards at all levels. It has been a strong advocate of what we call national plans and regional strategies for intercultural dialogue and cooperation and by this I mean the interconnection between the knowledge of those who have worked a lot in this direction so that we have the hope that what they have done, the experience and evaluation of what they have done is useful for those who are not doing the same or at least not doing it sufficiently enough to meet the challenges they are meeting at this moment.

So, national plans we call it this way, regional strategies we approved one for SE Europe, the famous Balkan region and the other, last year for the Mediterranean, the whole of the Mediterranean.

But let me... I'm not flattering at all. I'm not that kind of person. But let me praise the Australian government's new multicultural policy, the people of Australia and its key initiatives which provide a good example of what we call national plans in their natural intrinsic variety should in fact look like.

It goes without saying, that non-governmental organisations have a key role to play in shaping and implementing this strategy and achieving its goals. Strengthening its role, creating new opportunities to engage civic participation by individuals from all communities, involving youth from all backgrounds in dialogue and cooperation across divides is vital, absolutely vital to promote change.

More regional cooperation at civil society level can also be a driving force for change and I'm a try believer. If you have any knowledge and I think you have of my personal career as a normal lawyer and a general practitioner, not a doctor but a lawyer, and then going to Parliament and then going to municipal office of the capital of my country and then from there to the Presidency. This is a variety of experiences that in fact always takes me back to the community of the municipal people, and what they are doing, what they were doing, what they expect us to do, what is the gap between the citizen in general and the politician in particular.

This gap has to be filled and especially when you have multiculturalism and when you have so many languages being spoken and so many people coming from so many places, and citizenship being something that you can obviously get through the means that are at your disposal, this is an extraordinary richness that I think is worthwhile experiencing, exchanging views on it and of course looking forward and seeing what has to be done better if that is the case, in any case.

So, we are now going to hold our 4th general forum of the Alliance of Civilizations. It started in 2005 after the Madrid bombing and of course after 9/11. The idea was sponsored initially by the Spanish Prime Minister and Turkish Prime Minister and the previous Secretary General of the United Nations picked this idea up and launched representatives of 20 expert people to draft a report on, "What is the need to fill the gap of this kind of fight which is obviously damaging the normal relationship between people."

Here came the high level report, suggesting the creation of the Alliance of Civilizations and the High Representative, which is myself. We have been working in education in migration, in media and youth, trying to implement with States, with international organisations, with

civil society, this interrelation to find programs and projects and ideas to really encourage citizenship to work together for a better world. This is what in fact we have been doing.

So, we are now having after Madrid, Istanbul, Brazil, to diversify our global scope, we are having this global forum at Doha, Qatar at the end of this year, under the auspices of Her Highness Sheikha Mozza.

Indeed, civil society representatives have already been associated to the organisation of all our annual forums since 2007 until 2010 and the Alliance has been supporting a huge number of civil society initiatives such as for instance the Unity in Diversity Forum organised last year by the Global Dialogue Foundation in this city, which I commend for their initiative and with the hope obviously with a certain certainty that it will continue.

But ladies and gentlemen, the participation and involvement of civil society organisations in the Alliance has increased, has to continue to increase, has to develop and nurture to a point that it is now time for what I would call, a new deal.

There is such a huge potential energy for common action at various levels among civil society actors, but also between the latter and government and local powers. Governments need to understand that many things are being done at the local powers situation and position. Action that connects local, national, regional and global players, that is now a great time to develop a platform where synergies can be combined and mutually reinforced.

Let me tell you of course, something which is..., no transformation is possible without joint action, coordinated action between governments - the public sector and civil society, including the private sector and citizens as individuals in their communities, but also through the United Nations.

No doubt the Alliance's goals - addressing cultural diversity challenges has a part of sustainable development and a human dimension of peace which is how I put it at this stage of our developments in 2006 and 2007 as a fundamental pillar of sustainable development and this is the cultural diversity issue that has to be on the agenda of political activities and decision making processes. This can only be achieved by civil society organisations, by men and women who are at the cutting-edge of delivering the goals on the ground.

So my conclusion is that the Alliance's mission is to strengthen civil society organisations across the world as they promote human rights and democracy, as they advance sustainable development and foster intercultural dialogue and understanding.

My second conclusion if you'll allow me, is that the Alliance has to strengthen its role as a convener, as a catalyst and as a bridge builder. It has to do much much much more to connect peoples and to stimulate dialogue and cooperation across cultures, nations, communities and peoples.

I am always everyday amazed throughout countries where I happen to be that there are many things going on which others don't know that exist. If simply this coordination and transmission of what is being done, evaluation of what is being done, the setbacks that sometimes occur, all of this is of extreme importance to you know, push up the ladder of peace and understanding which I think is something that we cannot get away from, fortunately.

So, convener, catalyst and bridge builder and I hope that we can promote a global conversation and action and make the most of new communication technologies to promote innovative practices and partnerships.

My last highlight is to announce that in our annual forum I spoke to you about next December in Doha, I will present a vision of a strategic framework for a renewed deal so to speak, to engage all actors of social change in dialogue and cooperation and also a number of new initiatives for the coming years.

We need to really have commitments in this area, we need to have communities responsible for those commitments, we need to have international companies, international enterprises, individuals, universities, municipalities, associations, all these sectors one way or the other, have to tackle these issues everyday. Whether they are scientists studying strategies for the future, whether they are municipal workers doing with every day work which from where many successes can in-fact result.

All of us have to be in a way, together to address the importance of being together, working together, understanding diversity, making diversity an asset and never never never a liability.

So, I hope therefore, that Australia and in particular civil society organisations in close cooperation with central and regional governments, local partners, and other actors such as the private sector, universities and cultural centres and I repeat it now, will be among the initiators and committed actors of this new beginning.

So really... it reminds me of the early 90's when I addressed a similar, I won't say crowds, citizens in my own municipality, so it makes me feel that I am happy to be here some years later. One, I am alive. Second, I'm still with the same subject which gives me optimism that things are in a way, are going on.

So, I am delighted to hear your expectations and of course proposals to the Alliance and if we don't have enough time because I got lost in the traffic because of the main road was not possible to go through.

Anyway, I am here at your disposal and I really wish you all the best, and be proud of what you have accomplished up to now and be proud to continue. Not only to continue to accomplish but to continue to face the new challenges that will come through.

Thank you very much for your attention.