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Multiple
Religious
Identities

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Abstract

A Wish For Social Resilience : participation and perspectives on local inter-religious councils in contemporary Sweden

During the 20th century, Sweden developed into a mainly secularized society with low key institutional religious presence on the political scene. Church and state separated in year 2000, as a result of a long term development separating religion and politics in Sweden. But a new development has been taking place in the last decade in Sweden on municipality levels. Being a society with less the 5% of the population born abroad in the beginning of the 1960s, contemporary Sweden is today a cultural multi-diverse society with close to 20% of its population born abroad. As a result of migration Sweden has rather rapidly developed into a cultural diverse and multi-religious society. Starting in the year 2006 on a municipality level, representatives of religious organizations have in Sweden become invited participants in a growing number of Swedish cities through involvement in inter-religious councils. Often political local authorities has decided to take a leading role in the councils, seemingly out of a growing awareness of faith-based organizations crucial role in promoting social cohesion in local settings.

This paper presents a case study where the formation of an inter-religious council is taking place in a mid-sized Swedish town. The paper presentation outlines the result of interviews with three kinds of actors; (1) elected politicians responsible for strategic policymaking in local community, (2) civil servants responsible for carrying out these policies and (3) representatives of Christian and Moslem faith-based organizations active in the local community.

Main research questions are the following: What are the key expectations on the council from the different actors' point of view? What kind of challenges are perceived to be crucial by different actors which should be dealt with in the short and long run?

Analyses are made comparing similarities and disagreements in various respondents' views. The answers from the participants are also discussed through the lens of problematizing the overarching aim of the interreligious council. Does it promote a wished for social cohesion or does it involuntarily strengthen group conflict in pluralistic Sweden? The outcome of the empirical data is also put in a European context about the consequences on local level when interreligious dialogue is established as part of municipalities' inter-cultural strategies.