

The Norwegian report from study visit in Mechelen 8.-10. October, 2008

Surprising/different from Norway:

1. About CIMIC

We find that CIMIC is a very interesting organisation. The institution is much specialised since its mission is directed towards cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and a diversity management. From what we understand, the target groups are professionals and managers who work in an intercultural environment. In Norway we do not find such a specialised education. Although we have intercultural studies at university college level, they are more general than the studies CIMIC offer. As to diversity management, organisations and companies tend to offer internal training for their employees rather to send them to a educational institution. Diversity management is a relatively new phenomenon in Norway.

2. The allochtonous

In Belgium the term allochtonous refers to persons that have their roots in another country than the one they are actually living in. They may be born in Belgium but they grandparents are born in another country. Such a term can be felt as a label (stigmatising). At the same time it may contribute to identify and finding solutions to specific problems related to immigration. In Norway it has recently (2008) been decided that persons of second and third generation immigration background are to be referred to as Norwegians. In Norway the terms second and third generation have contributed to create a gap between "us" and "them".

A common point in the testimonials from Soumia and Wafa (both born in Belgium of Moroccan parents) was that they both were pushed into professional/technical studies at secondary school and that they later chose a more academic path. It seems to be common in Belgium that students of immigrant origin are advised to continue with professional/technical studies rather than more academic studies. The consequence of this is that they do not get to use their talents and that they often are stuck in low level jobs. This used to be the situation in Norway as well until about ten years ago. Today especially many girls of immigrant origin continue with university studies and they are successful. But very often they have to work very hard at secondary school to be able to continue their studies. The situation is not so positive for boys of immigrant origin. It is a problem that boys of immigrant background drop out of secondary school and start working instead.

Soumia chose to start her own consultancy company where she can exploit her own intercultural background and competence for business purposes. Wafa said she had lacked role models but she did not seem to be aware of the fact that she herself has become a role model. She did not seem to be aware that she is a resource in the company where she works due to her multi-cultural background and awareness as to intercultural dialogue and intercultural issues. It seemed to us that Soumia has a greater consciousness of her own multicultural identity.

3. The Flemish Minority Forum

This is an independent umbrella organisation with 17 member organisations which again have 1000 local migrant organisations as members. The important issue for this organisation is advocacy; that being able to talk with one voice is important to gain influence on developing policy by giving advice to the authorities. The organisation uses different methods: consultations with decision makers, advisory councils, network and media. The representatives in the advisory bodies are offered training in how to argue, formulate advices, informal communication etc (empowerment). In Norway the immigrant

organisations have not yet been able to agree on an umbrella organisation which would be useful in order to influence decision makers as in Belgium.

What is similar (and different)

4. Illegal refugees

As to illegal refugees, it seems that Belgium recognises that there are a number of illegal refugees in the country, and that this is a problem. They also have an estimate as to how many persons this can include. In Norway, there are also illegal refugees/immigrants but this does not seem to be a topic although there is evidence that even children disappear from refugee centres. Although the media discuss this problem, it is not much discussed in society as such. Asylum seekers who are waiting to have their cases decided are allowed to work in this period. If they are declined, they are not allowed to work. The Norwegian government has proposed (2008) that children should be allowed to stay in the country until they reach the age of 18 and then they can be sent out of the country unless they are granted a permission to stay on humanitarian reasons. This has provoked a lot of protests and the proposal is likely to be turned down.

5. Sleepwell Youth Hostel (Brussels)

Sleepwell is a youth hostel in Brussels. The director is born in Belgium but with parents coming from Congo. The attitude of the director is that one should judge a person's competences and not at the colour of his or her skin or the ethnic/cultural background. This is due to his own personal experiences. His moral is that it is important not to create barriers, not to favour certain groups but to give equal opportunities to all. As he says, he can give opportunities to people but they have to grasp the chance and show responsibility.

We have seen cases like this in other countries and we know about similar cases in Norway as well. The aim is to move on from personal initiatives and a practice based on an individual's experience to more organised and systematic diversity management and policy in this field.