

Intercultural Policies in Spain: Insights from the Intercultural Cities Experience

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Abstract: *Over the past 25 years, Spain, along with several of its regions and municipalities, has developed various policies aimed at integrating people of foreign origin—an integration often framed, at least formally, in intercultural terms. The State, several regions, and multiple municipalities have implemented plans, programs, and resources to foster intercultural dialogue and exchange. In fact, Spain is the country with the second-highest number of cities participating in the Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities programme (ICC). This research brief succinctly analyzes key characteristics of intercultural policies in a set of Spanish intercultural cities, focusing on their efforts to combat racism and discrimination, as well as the main challenges they currently face. The findings presented are primarily based on a series of interviews with key actors involved in the development of these policies across various Spanish municipalities. Participation in the Intercultural Cities Network has served as a pathway to political and social engagement with the intercultural paradigm, as well as a means of promoting inclusion and conviviality. However, there are notable differences between cities, and significant progress remains to be made in combating discrimination and evaluating these policies effectively.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, various countries and cities have pursued divergent approaches and implemented a range of strategies to address cultural and religious diversity in European cities – ranging from efforts to suppress such diversity to initiatives designed to support and promote it. This text reflects on the current state of intercultural policies at the local level in Spain – a country where the intercultural paradigm continues to enjoy a relatively positive reputation among policymakers and professionals working in the fields of immigration and social inclusion, and where several municipalities have formally embraced the intercultural approach.¹

Drawing on data from a recent study of six Spanish cities participating in the Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities Programme – based primarily on 17 semi-structured interviews conducted with 18 key stakeholders – this research brief offers a short reflection on local intercultural policies in Spain. It focuses on their defining

features, their role in addressing racism and discrimination, and the principal challenges this policy field currently faces. Based on our initial insights, we conclude with recommendations.

THE INTERCULTURAL POLICY IN EUROPE AND IN SPAIN

The Intercultural Cities Programme (also called 'Intercultural Cities'), established in 2008 by the Council of Europe, expresses the European commitment to promoting interculturalism in cities across Europe and beyond.² The programme supports cities and regions in reviewing and adapting their policies through an intercultural lens, as well as developing comprehensive intercultural strategies to manage diversity as an asset for the whole society. Intercultural Cities also serves as a platform to connect cities and leaders globally, creating a community where initiatives and practices are analysed and shared to inspire each other.

The four interlinked values that underpin the development of an intercultural city are:³ 1) Real equality, actively pursued by preventing discrimination and adapting the city's governance, institutions, and services to meet the needs of a diverse population; 2) Diversity as a positive resource, pursuing a pluralistic city identity built around a shared vision and common values; 3) Meaningful interaction, promoting occasions for encounters, exchange, and dialogue; 4) Active citizenship and participation, to ensure that no one is left behind and that even those without formal citizenship have a voice in shaping their local society.⁴ A total of 149 cities have decided to participate in the programme, with 95 of them

located in European Union countries. Italy and Spain, with 31 and 25 cities respectively, are the two countries with the highest number of participating cities.

Compared to other European countries, Spain began implementing policies to promote integration and cultural coexistence once it started receiving significant numbers of migrants. Unlike in other European countries, migrants were never considered 'guest workers'; rather, they were primarily expected to settle in Spain. This expectation led to the implementation of actions aimed at promoting integration into society, especially at the local level. Most of these actions have been carried out by civil society organizations, which have significantly increased their presence in this field over the past two decades. These organizations are primarily NGOs, including several ethnic organizations.

Among the different political strategies implemented at the national level, the two editions of the 'Strategic Plan on Citizenship and Integration' (covering the period between 2007 and 2014) stand out. Today, the overarching framework for these policies is the 'Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion Against Racism and Discrimination' (2024-2027). In most of these plans, as well as in regional and local ones, integration has been framed as a two-way process from an intercultural perspective. Assimilation has only been explicitly demanded by far-right parties and some other conservative politicians. Furthermore, integration policies are typically linked – at least formally – to efforts to combat racism and discrimination affecting migrants and their families.

THE INTERCULTURAL PARADIGM: CURRENT SITUATION AND DEBATES

Interculturalism is a political paradigm for managing cultural diversity through the promotion of equality and non-discrimination, recognition of diversity, and positive interaction.⁵ In the spirit of mutual exchange, interculturalism places strong emphasis on interaction between different groups,

aiming to break down stereotypes and reduce fear or rejection of 'the Other', while embracing the enrichment that stems from diversity and, through that, fostering social cohesion.⁶

This paradigm has gained significant intellectual support in recent years. As Zapata-Barrero⁷ has pointed out, an 'intercultural turn' has emerged in public policies, particularly at the local level, based on the promotion of positive contact, anti-discrimination policies, and diversity advantage management. European institutions have regarded interculturalism as a crucial instrument for strengthening the social inclusion of immigrants at the city level⁸ and have placed intercultural dialogue at the heart of several political initiatives to manage diversity.

By focusing on interactions between people of diverse cultural and national backgrounds, interculturalism is often seen as a step beyond multiculturalism.⁹ While multiculturalism emphasizes diversity and the right of cultural groups to maintain their traditions, interculturalism emphasizes engagement and exchange between those groups. Thus, interculturalism fosters collaboration among groups through the transcendence of categorical differences, thereby promoting a citizenship paradigm grounded in an essential *contact-based approach* – an element that is largely absent in both multicultural and national-civic models of citizenship.¹⁰

To build healthy and democratic societies, exchanges among people from different backgrounds and intercultural dialogue, rooted in openness, fairness, and willingness, are essential.¹¹ Positive intergroup contact helps mitigate negative stereotypes and prejudice toward outgroups.¹²

Intercultural scholars usually underline that interculturalism must confront ethnic and racial discrimination, as equality of rights is one of its core principles, along with the recognition of diversity and the facilitation of interaction. The emergence of conviviality and meaningful intercultural dialogue presupposes a context of symmetrical relations

among participants.¹³ As a tool for fostering living together in egalitarian diversity, interculturalism can serve as an effective tool to promote important shifts in attitudes, particularly those that sustain subtle or unconscious forms of discrimination.¹⁴

To make interculturalism work in a way that genuinely promotes equality, diversity, and conviviality, a balance must be struck between recognizing differences on the one hand, and commonalities on the other. It is essential to move beyond 'functional interculturalism',¹⁵ which operates as if inequalities do not exist, thereby perpetuating them. Additionally, it is necessary to move away from post-racial and color-blind perspectives that overlook or diminish the role of race and racialization in the discrimination faced by racialized individuals.¹⁶ It is similarly important to avoid 'post-racial interculturalism', which posits that identity categorizations based on race, origin, and nationality are becoming less relevant to the diversity debate. The risk is that a post-racial form of interculturalism evades the social significance of race and the legacies of colonialism, and thereby the effective tackling of ethnic and racial discrimination.¹⁷

Finally, it is equally pivotal to conduct the management of diversity without categorising individuals into fixed cultural or ethnic 'boxes'. Often the case in multicultural contexts, this 'boxing' overlooks the complexity of the individual's identity.¹⁸ Thus, by focusing on both differences and commonalities of individuals, we see the benefit of the intercultural paradigm in creating more room for dialogue, and through this, mutual understanding.

STUDYING INTERCULTURAL CITIES IN SPAIN

Aim and methods

Our study on Intercultural Cities describes the current situation in six Spanish cities with significant work in the field of interculturalism. It seeks to identify the opportunities and barriers to enhancing intercultural policies and their role in promoting positive coexistence and equal rights.

Our research questions were the following: How does the municipality define interculturalism and which principles are prioritized in practice? How have these policies evolved, and how has the political will to implement them changed over time? What role does anti-discrimination play in the local intercultural agenda? What are the main challenges to strengthening and broadening these policies?

We conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with 18 stakeholders, including city councillors, practitioners and representatives from CSOs, in the following six cities: Barcelona, Bilbao, València, Sabadell, Castelló and Salt. Additionally, we interviewed both the director and the coordinator of the Spanish Network of Intercultural Cities (RECI). The cities were selected for their active intercultural initiatives and their commitment to anti-discrimination goals, based on the overall ICC Index scores and the specific scores related to anti-discrimination activities.¹⁹ The interviews lasted one hour on average, with most carried out in person. We conducted a thematic analysis based on the topics outlined in our research questions. It is important to note that there might be a slight bias in the results since most of the interviewed stakeholders worked closely with these policies in their municipalities. In the following sections we share some of our initial insights.

Intercultural local strategies

The cities participating in the study have very different social and political realities, as well as different levels of intercultural commitment and ways of developing and organising their intercultural work. There is variable political commitment both within and between cities and among different actors in the cities: from a strong and well-sustained commitment to certain unawareness and lack of knowledge.

Political commitment and common perspectives among technical and political stakeholders have enabled the consolidation of intercultural work with notable setbacks when this has not happened. In this regard, Barcelona emerges as a strong role

model of what a city can achieve when there is a historical political consensus on the priority of this kind of policies. Over the past 20 years, governments from different political parties (social-democrats, nationalist conservatives, and left-wing parties) have consistently supported these policies.²⁰ Barcelona clearly stands out as a reference for intercultural work in Spain. It scores 79 out of 100 in the ICC Index, and 94 in anti-discrimination policies. With 33% of its residents born outside of Spain,²¹ the city has a specific programme to promote interculturalism – the Barcelona's Interculturality Plan 2021-2030 – which builds on the political strategy initiated by the previous plan (2011-2020). This broad and sustained commitment is an exception in Spanish politics, where political shifts frequently impact cities' commitment to integration and intercultural policies, often leading to the discontinuation or underfunding of programmes and services in this field, as seen recently, for instance, in the case of the city of València.

Some cities, such as Barcelona, Bilbao, and Sabadell, have clearly defined their intercultural work, as expressed in the interviews. This contrasts with other cities, where all activities related to migration and integration are broadly labelled as intercultural work—an approach that risks undermining the relevance, visibility, and scope of intercultural policies.

All the cities adopt the three main principles of the Intercultural Cities Programme – equality and non-discrimination, diversity recognition, and positive interaction – but they express different priorities in this regard. Some cities place special emphasis on advancing equality and non-discrimination (Barcelona, Bilbao), encouraging the social and political participation of migrants and their descendants (Barcelona, Bilbao), or fostering cultural interaction (Castelló, Bilbao, València).

Civil society organizations play a significant role in larger cities. In Barcelona, these organizations have played a key role in the development of the highly regarded *anti-rumour strategy* that was designed to

counter negative myths about migration and its consequences in the city to tackle racism and discrimination. This strategy, which includes a range of awareness-raising activities, involves around 500 different organizations and over 600 individual participants. The contribution of civil society organizations has also proven to be significant in Bilbao, where they actively engaged with the municipality through the Local Immigration Council.

Addressing ethnic and racial discrimination

In the studied cities the anti-discrimination work focuses on prevention, awareness-raising and the erosion of stereotypes (as seen above), with specific interventions in cases of explicit discrimination handled by other specialized bodies.

In most cities there is a clear lack of knowledge about how discrimination and inequality affect racialized people, migrants and their descendants. Since there is no data available to measure the prevalence of discrimination, most of the interviewees speak only about their personal impressions.

A notable exception is, once again, Barcelona, where data is gathered to identify the main areas where exclusion and discrimination occur. Drawn from various official registers and a periodic survey, the city has developed a tool of 33 different indicators that measure the gaps between the Spanish-born and foreign-born, for example in access to work and housing, income, or use of public services. This systematic analysis has revealed, for instance, that although the foreign-born population made up about 29% of the total population in 2021, they represented only 1.3% of the municipal workforce.²² As a result of this, positive actions have been implemented in the city to promote 'culturally diverse hiring'. This includes recognizing the foreign languages spoken by the largest communities in the city as a specific merit in hiring for municipal positions. The absence of people of foreign origin among local public servants, along with their lack of political and social representation, has been consistently highlighted

by interviewees—and by scholars in the field—as both a driver and an expression of ethnic and racial discrimination.

Main challenges ahead

Currently, all six cities face difficulties in maintaining and expanding political commitment, triggered by the increasing salience of anti-immigration discourse in Spain and the gains made by the anti-immigration and anti-diversity party VOX at the national, regional and local levels. These gains have enabled the party to participate in various regional and local governments, though not yet at the national level.

The interviewed practitioners highlight the strong need to gain the continued support of residents and to prevent them from internalizing the lies and negative views about migration that have become increasingly popular in recent years. They believe that one of the priorities in these intercultural cities must be the creation of narratives that effectively counter anti-immigration discourse, as well as improving how these narratives are communicated to the public to shape their perceptions.

Furthermore, as our study shows, one of the main obstacles to the progress of interculturalism in Spain is the specific situation of discrimination affecting migrants and refugees. Socially, they are primarily represented as labour force and are often relegated to jobs that Spaniards are unwilling to do. As the then mayor of El Ejido stated some years ago, 'At 6 a.m. all migrants are needed but at 6 p.m. all of them are excess'. This sentiment appears to reflect broader societal attitudes prevalent in the country. Poor working conditions, limited opportunities for social and political participation, lack of recognition, and the precarious situation affecting migrants – particularly those who are undocumented – hinder the fostering of dialogue and coexistence on equal terms.²³

The interviewees point to the importance of ensuring that intercultural policies are seen as benefiting everyone, not just migrants and refugees in need (Barcelona, Bilbao, RECI). They generally

advocate for separating these policies from the social work departments to which they have been typically linked, and for making intercultural policies cross-sectoral, ensuring their presence across different local departments (culture, sports, education, security, wellbeing, etc.). They advocate for investment in analytical studies on the state of cultural diversity, coexistence, and discrimination (Barcelona, Bilbao, Castelló) to improve local intercultural policies. These policies should also be more effectively monitored by measuring their impacts through a robust set of indicators. The ICC Index, while useful, only measures (with limitations) the degree of policy implementation and does not provide insights into its impact and effectiveness.

FINAL REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the interviewees' perspective, participation in the Intercultural Cities programme and the Spanish Network of Intercultural Cities has been a fundamental milestone, transforming how interculturality and intercultural policy are understood in their cities. It has clearly reshaped public policies and diversity management strategies. This initiative has redefined the core principles of a diverse city at the administrative level, leading to significant improvements: greater clarity and systematization of concepts, methodologies, and tools; a heightened focus on countering stereotypes and on creating new positive narratives; increased collaboration between municipalities and civil society organisations in designing and implementing integration programs and offers; and growing awareness of the importance of evaluating the results and impacts of implemented actions.

However, discrimination and negative representations of migrants are becoming increasingly salient. As a result, promoting intercultural policies should prioritize addressing these issues, creating conditions for greater inclusion and enabling more equitable relationships. This will be particularly challenging in cities that focus less on combating discrimination and more on promoting cultural encounters.

As mentioned above, intercultural policies in Spain are increasingly threatened by the growing influence of xenophobic rhetoric and practices. The main challenges will be to effectively counteract the increasingly salient negative narratives on migrants and to maintain political commitment to intercultural policies. Additionally, there is a need to prevent the widespread acceptance of xenophobic rhetoric in the political sphere, particularly if the conservative party generally embraces it and the social democrats downplay these policies to retain electoral support from their traditional base, which may increasingly oppose migration in the coming years. As a significant political shift on this issue is now more likely to happen, it is urgent to reflect more on how academia, social movements and public institutions can contribute to the maintenance and expansion of intercultural policies in Spain and beyond.

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