

We expect cities to foster multiculturalism, but they are struggling

February 13 2020, by Licia Cianetti



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

During the past decade the [idea](#) that multiculturalism [is a failed experiment](#) has spread across Europe. The introduction of policies that target migrants and people of [migrant backgrounds](#) seem to suggest that the "multicultural moment"—if ever there was one—is truly over.

In this environment, many are looking to cities for fresh ideas about how to build a more [inclusive](#), [just](#) and sustainable multicultural society. According to [city](#) network [Eurocities](#), "the future of Europe depends on its cities."

However, [my research](#) shows that cities' ability to foster ethnic and racial inclusion is being limited by austerity and the rise of beliefs that "native" cultures and people should come first.

Great expectations

The expectation that cities have the answer to how to make diversity work comes from the idea that they are natural locations for creativity and meetings between cultures. This overlooks the inequality and segregation also found in cities.

Nevertheless, many cities seem to have bought into the idea of their progressive potential. [Eurocities](#) is marking the first 100 days of the new EU Commission with examples of cities that can inspire the EU through their innovative ways of tackling "European challenges."

These include Bulgarian capital Sofia's [inclusive approach](#) to providing services to newcomers; Oslo's [business incubator](#) for young people which includes migrants; and Berlin's [Roma inclusion program](#).



The City of Tolerance mural, Lisbon, Portugal. Author provided

But do cities really hold the key to a more inclusive future? My [research](#) on [multicultural cities](#) shows that the answer to this question is a moving target: ideas about which policies cities should introduce to promote ethnic, racial and religious inclusion have shifted over time.

Austerity is one cause of this shift. Councils' budgets have been slashed by central government cuts and reduced local tax revenues. At the same time, more [social policies](#)—like care for vulnerable residents, tackling homelessness and indeed [integration](#) – are being passed down to local administrations to deal with. With the number of people at risk of poverty having increased [twice as much in cities than in other areas](#), cities increasingly [struggle to meet needs](#).

An additional issue is the growth of nativism. This calls for policymakers to prioritize the needs of "native" people: think of "British jobs for British workers" or "*prima gli Italiani*"—"Italians first."

This combination of austerity and nativism puts cities who commit to promoting ethnic and racial inclusion in a tight spot. They must do it

with reduced budgets and in the face of growing hostility to spending limited resources on "non-natives." This is changing the ways city officials think about inclusion.

Targeting individuals

One place to look for changes in cities' approach to multiculturalism is in the documents produced by the transnational networks that cities join to exchange [best practices](#) and come up with common agendas. These include [Eurocities](#) or the Council of Europe's [Intercultural Cities Programme](#). Two broad shifts have taken place.

First, networks are increasingly promoting policies that target individuals rather than groups. These include [programmes](#) such as employability training, or start-up incubators aimed at improving the skills and life chances of individuals regardless of their ethnic background. These are preferred to policies that are specifically designed to include a particularly excluded ethnic group in—say—local decision-making.

The networks' reasoning is that it is better to avoid as much as possible group-based policies that will create [parallel societies](#) – one of the main criticisms of multiculturalism. These policies focused on individuals are also considered to be a budget-saving measure, as they can often be delivered by adding inclusion into existing programs—what is called "[mainstreaming](#)"—rather than launching new expensive ones.



Credit: Thăng-Nhật Trần from Pexels

A pragmatic approach

At the same time, the networks are celebrating the way cities [are finding pragmatic solutions](#) to politically charged questions. They point to [best practices](#) that respond to cultural divisions with projects—like festivals, arts or theater groups—that promote contact between cultures and improve "community cohesion." Or [projects](#) that tackle poverty among migrants by helping them get into the job market or start a business.

This approach presents highly charged issues in practical, problem-solving terms –in a way that focusing on rights, for example, does not. It

is also a response to austerity. It can save money as community cohesion programs are usually delivered through the charitable or voluntary sectors. And it can be "sold" as an investment that makes business sense for the city, since there is evidence that more diverse [companies](#) and [places](#) do better financially.

But does this mean that austerity and the pressure to put "natives" first are influencing cities' policies to such an extent that we shouldn't expect anything truly innovative to come out of them? Or can we expect cities to challenge these pressures? The brief answer to these questions is a bit of both.

The attempts by some cities in Europe and beyond to oppose anti-migrant legislation and [challenge austerity](#) are cause for hope. For example, mayors in Italy refused to comply with a government decree which limited the rights of migrants. However, the trends discussed above should also make us cautious.

The combination of austerity and nativism means that the ways we think about what an inclusive city can and should do are changing. This is not necessarily all bad. For example, making inclusion a part of all aspects of local [policy](#)-making could deliver better results than group-targeted programs, provided it is not done simply to cut costs.

However, city governments are making these policy choices under strong pressures to work with fewer resources and to do it in ways that do not provoke a backlash from the "natives." This shrinks their policy options. Cities might indeed be able to create a more inclusive future, but they face a great challenge in doing so.

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