



Connecting Actions

Paris 2016



First Symposium
for a
European Platform of Civil Society actors for
Coexistence
through
Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue

The background



Intercultural and interreligious relations have become increasingly tense for the past few years in France and Europe. Identities affirming themselves in the public realm are more and more perceived as threats to every other group's identities.

Non profit organisations promoting citizen, interreligious, intercultural dialogue have been working for many years to provide people with a safe space and a thorough process to learn to know each other, understand each other, build social bonds and work together to improve the quality of coexistence. In the past months, numerous initiatives have sparked to counter the tearing up of our social fabric, which has only worsened in the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks. Sometimes, such initiatives started without the know-how that older organisations possess. It is obvious that Civil Society Organizations (CSO's) are essential actors of the collective efforts to reinforce social cohesion and Coexistence. This work can best combat the risks of radicalisation and violent extremism as well as discrimination that usually follow violent events such as the one France witnessed in 2015 and 2016. Today, more than ever, those organisations need support, guidance and coordination. Unfortunately, there is still a lot to be done to contain the wave of intolerance, victimhood and self-centeredness that seduces an increasing number of people.

Civil actors of dialogue and active coexistence remain too isolated despite their common mission and their shared interest to collaborate and maximize their impact. Too many of those organizations work alone, with few resources and without really trying to seek inspiration from other experiences nationally and abroad. To put an end to this

situation, four organizations, the *Muslim Jewish Conference*, *Coexister*, *3 Faiths Forum* and the *European Union of Jewish Students* gathered on December 8, 2015 to think of the best way to institutionalize citizen dialogue work by organizing a series of events gathering various actors of coexistence in Europe and by creating a sustainable platform for mutualisation and supervision.

The project



In the aforementioned context of tense relationships, CSO's working for improved coexistence can become the best shields against the escalation of mistrust and radicalisation of mentalities. Public awareness of dialogue initiatives is poor and such organisations lack the support they would need to increase their impact on society. They are far too often isolated and too seldom join forces, even cultivating differences of style, strategies or identities even though they share the same objectives. It is however possible to transform this encounter into collective intelligence and broader representativeness.

In the context of *MJC*'s interest to create partnerships on common projects, an initial exploration has been done towards such European and French CSO's using interreligious et intercultural dialogue as their main tool for an improved coexistence. *MJC* core team members have had the opportunity to meet with many of those organisations on the ground, discovering their actions and interests. From those encounters emerged the expressed need to meet more organisations, discuss their respective initiatives, share best practices and increase their visibility.

In the seven years that the *MJC* has been working in this field, it appeared difficult to find space and time to sit together with organisations from around Europe and throughout the world that we would have loved to learn from, get inspired by, and get recommendations and knowledge from, in order not to make the same mistakes that they did, along the way.

So *MJC*, with the help of four other European organisations, *Coexister*, *Three Faiths Forum*, *Faith Matters* and the *European Union of Jewish Students*, as well as the support of *OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR)*, selected and invited organisations that are doing excellent work in this field of interreligious and intercultural dialogue to exchange best practices, learn from each other, and start building an efficient network of change makers.

It was important for the *Muslim Jewish Conference* to organise this first event in Paris. The terror attacks that have happened over the last 2 years, the rise of intercommunal tensions, the widespread feeling of identity threats made it even more important to increase the number and quality of dialogue spaces for a type of conversation that rarely happens - where one can speak sincerely and with respect for differing opinions and with the aim to learn. There are enough movements and organisations doing this essential work but not enough opportunities to exchange practices.

The participants



This first Symposium of dialogue practitioners unfolded through 3 days and gathered

around 20 French and European CSO representatives and citizen dialogue actors coming from 13 different countries. Recently created or well established, Small or big, youth based or not, all those organisations are implementing or supporting dialogue programs in their respective societies. They are:

- ❖ ***Muslim Jewish Conference - MJC (Austria)***
- ❖ ***Coexister (France)***
- ❖ ***Faith Matters (GB)***
- ❖ ***Three Faiths Forum - 3FF (GB)***
- ❖ ***European Union of Jewish Students - EUJS (Germany)***
- ❖ ***A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe - CEJI (Belgium)***
- ❖ ***Together for Sweden - TFS (Sweden)***
- ❖ ***Exit (Sweden)***
- ❖ ***Salaam Shalom (Germany)***
- ❖ ***Respect (Switzerland)***
- ❖ ***Sharing Perspective Foundation - SPF (Netherlands)***
- ❖ ***United Religions Initiatives - URI (International)***
- ❖ ***Meta-Culture (India)***
- ❖ ***Comunita Religiosa Islamica Italiana - COREIS (Italia)***
- ❖ ***Institut des Hautes Etudes Islamiques - IHEI (France)***
- ❖ ***We Act (Denmark)***
- ❖ ***Observatori Blanquerna de Comunicacio, Religio i Cultura (Spain)***
- ❖ ***Fonds de Dotation Grandir Ensemble (France)***
- ❖ ***Initiatives et Changement (France)***
- ❖ ***Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research - SIETAR (France)***

That list of course was not exhaustive and the conveners are aware that there are many more actors working in this field. The goal of this initiative is to be ever more inclusive. *MJC* made clear that their role was only one of conveners, not supervisors.

The Format and content



Prior to the encounter, participants were invited to modify the agenda and share their preliminary thoughts on the various topics proposed by the conveners. This allowed each of them to take ownership of the process. A public website was put together by the Muslim Jewish Conference team where other participating organisations started to add content: <http://www.connectingactions.net/>

The encounter was broken down between 2 days of exchange between those participants and a 3rd day to communicate the results of this exchange with the French and International press and officials. During the first 2 days, participants had the opportunity to discuss their experiences and ideas on certain themes of common interests. After presenting their respective local contexts, participants exchanged on their respective philosophies and practices, including through answering some of the following questions:

- What does active coexistence mean?
- What methods and objectives for dialogue?
- What are our challenges?
- What can our organisations do to combat radicalism and extremism, after having defined it?
- How can we get the resources we need?
- How should we deal with media and how can we attract their attention on dialogue initiatives?
- What political or social messages should we pass on?
- What are the possible innovations in our sector?

The facilitation of discussions happened through tested techniques and methodologies, used by the CSO themselves. Those techniques included the Open Forum and the World Café amongst other brainstorming and collective intelligence processes. A few of the participants suggested and directly facilitated some of the sections.

The philosophy of the encounter was the same as any of the dialogue programs implemented by the participants themselves: all were encouraged to be authentic, respectful and open-minded.

The 3 days were the occasion for the participants to:

- Present their respective organisations and programmes.
- Start establishing stronger inter organisational relationships and channels of communication.
- Share their diagnostics on their respective societies – and identify the following issues: clash of ideologies, silo communication, rise of extremisms, racism, fears, identity threats and lack of know how on the ways to deal with those feelings, lack of diversity management skills and processes, etc.
- Reflect on what value their organisations can bring and on the relevance of dialogue: gather “moderates” and empower them to positively influence society or gather people who do not usually have the opportunity to interact directly.
- Reflect on their values and identity as organisations promoting dialogue.
- Share some of their practices, for instances their preferences between open forums or closed discussion, the various values of differing facilitation styles, the degree of training required for facilitators, the question of mixing dialogue programmes with education or anti-racism activism, etc.
- Discuss the issue of positioning the field of intercultural dialogue towards the rise of the fields of anti-radicalisation or countering violent extremism.
- Train further on how to establish relationships and use non-violent communication techniques when in disagreement.
- Reaffirm their need to train more on how to constructively engage with difference.
- Elaborate on joint projects.

The conversations alternated between sharing our thoughts on the political and cultural contexts of our work and elaborating on concrete outcomes. There were a lot of discussions on both who we are and what we can do together.

Even though most participants were directly involved with interreligious and intercultural dialogue programs, identifying common objectives and strategies proved to be a lengthy process and the consensus amongst participants was that this needed more time. This appeared very natural for participants as identity can only evolve and adapt and takes time to be defined. Building a common identity also involves tackling differences. But the idea of several innovative networks of cooperation, formed around specific issues to increase their impact, and gathered through a loose network gathered most support. Participants did not have a mandate to create any kind of joint organisation or declaration so it was not yet the time to agree on a common identity. However, some participants reckoned that the network could be one of “organisations

working on understanding between people of differing backgrounds, promoting *vivre ensemble* (living together), *faire ensemble* (doing together) and combating intolerance”.

They affirmed their willingness to co-develop skills to accomplish those missions. Most of what we can do is help each other develop.

The output



Before and during the Symposium, participants actively contributed to creating a toolkit compiling some of the best practices for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. This toolkit is still growing and being fine-tuned. As well as this, the group collectively designed the features of an internal online platform for sharing resources, news and keep open channels of collaboration.

The last day of the symposium enabled CSO's to reaffirm their solidarity and their will to continue to strengthen their bonds and foster more cohesion and synergy together through future encounters. This will start with the set up of a common online platform and reinforced collaborations. The last day also enabled the conveners to call out on citizens and public institutions on the necessity to provide human, political and financial support to those who do an essential job to preserve our society's unity.

One of the ideas that originated this initiative and that was definitely reinforced during those two days, is that dialogue, whether it is intercultural, interfaith, etc. is a serious job and is a key to many of the challenges that we face.

A number of participants expressed their intention to join the “2020 Campaign” to promote across Europe the idea of peaceful and active coexistence. Other participants have communicated an interest in *Meta-Culture’s* project, “Talk the Walk”. *Meta-Culture* will be taking this forward with them in designing and facilitating community dialogues between host communities and immigrants/ refugees. As well as this, the French organisations *Initiative et Changement* and the *Fonds de Dotation Grandir Ensemble* have decided to unite their efforts to create regular open spaces for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Others have started discussions to start collaborating.

Perhaps the most valuable outcome of this symposium is that participants were able to better know each other and cultivate their efforts for synergy.

The group also agreed on the necessity to continue this effort and reorganise a future follow up conference before the end of next year. Until then, the group has started to collaboratively design an online platform, which will serve as a continuous and comprehensive channel of communication where participants will be able to share reflections, resources and joint initiatives.



The organisers

The initiator: the Muslim Jewish Conference

The *Muslim Jewish Conference*, founded in 2010 by Ilja Sichrovsky, is a Non Governmental organisation, which activity is run by volunteers from all origins and which aims at building trust, mutual respect and collaboration between young Jews and Muslims, religious or secular. Each year since 2010, the organisation gathers over a hundred young Jews and Muslims coming from different parts of the World for a week long intensive interreligious, citizen dialogue in order to better understand each other overcome antagonisms and initiate common projects. The *MJC* team gives those young leaders the opportunity to launch they own projects in order to promote a sustainable change in the field of interreligious cooperation and intercultural understanding.

MJC already received very significant international support with the sponsorship of Former US President Bill Clinton, the Austrian President Heinz Fisher, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sebastian Kurz, the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina Bakir Izetbegovic, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Rabbi Andrew Baker and Mufti Mustafa Ceric, amongst many other distinguished personalities from the religious and political world, as well as the *OSCE*.

For the past 6 years, the Muslim Jewish Conference therefore gathered more than 600 actors of change who combat hate, extremism and intolerance. The *MJC* [brochure](#), available online, highlights the impact of this conference on the participants and their communities. The young students, NGO leaders, Human Rights activists, entrepreneurs, researchers or political leaders are each time invited to design and implement joint projects in their respective societies to fight all forms of intolerance and promote a better intercultural understanding and interreligious friendship.

With its international experience and network, the *MJC* wishes to contribute to federate youth and action-oriented citizen, intercultural and interreligious dialogue practitioners.

With this objective, the *MJC* established a partnership with the French organization *Coexister* that has also been working for the past 6 years for “active coexistence” between the various religious or faith groups present in France, gathering several thousands of young people throughout the country. *Coexister* and the *MJC* are convinced of the necessity to federate the highest number possible of coexistence actors to increase their visibility and impact.

The steering committee

The *MJC* is joined by three other organisations to design and carry out this project. Those three organisations met in December 2015 to elaborate the principles of this project. They are:

Coexister (<http://www.coexister.fr/>), the interreligious youth movement, is a non profit and social enterprise that, through dialogue, solidarity, and advocacy work, promotes

active coexistence. They reject both proselytism and syncretism: clash of civilisations and relativism being two pitfalls that don't allow for a true and healthy coexistence. Their moto "Diversity in faith, Unity in action" invites them to build unity around what we do by preserving the diversity of what we believe in. With 600 volunteers et 1800 members doing daily groundwork for a positive use of diversity, *Coexister* had its successes recognized by national and international institutions for its inclusive vision of the French concept of *laïcité*.

3 Faiths Forum (<http://www.3ff.org.uk/>) is an interfaith organisation from the UK who works to build good relations between people of different faiths, beliefs and cultures by creating safe spaces in schools, universities, places of work and worship and the wider community where people can engage with questions of belief and identity and meet people different from them. It also delivers trainings in effective and intercultural communication and dialogue.

European Union of Jewish Students (<http://www.eujs.com/>) is a pluralistic, inclusive and non-partisan umbrella organization supporting Jewish student unions throughout Europe and representing its members in international institutions and organizations. Founded in 1978, they currently have 35 member organizations. *EUJS* seeks to strengthen Jewish communities and European society through Jewish student activism and advocacy. Therefore, *EUJS* connects peer-led, independent Jewish student unions throughout Europe and supports them in fulfilling the aspirations of the Jewish people; developing Jewish religious, spiritual, cultural and social heritage, and ensuring continuity. Through its actions, *EUJS*, actively promotes interfaith dialogue.



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EUROPEAN UNION OF JEWISH STUDENTS

Fostering Jewish student activism since 1978



3FF

THREE FAITHS FORUM



FAITH MATTERS



OSCE

ODIHR