



Building Intercultural Bridges: Lessons from the Danish-Arab Partnership Program

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International cooperation programs can serve to build bridges between Europe and the Arab world. Yet not all cross-cultural meetings are designed to strengthen relations succeed in this objective. Lessons from the Danish-Arab Partnership Program can serve to bolster international efforts for intercultural dialogue.

WHEN DOES DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION BUILD BRIDGES?

The Danish-Arab Partnership Program (DAPP), launched by the Danish government in 2003, has as one of its objectives to 'establish a basis for improved dialogue, understanding and cooperation between Denmark and the Arab region'. The Danish program is but one of several initiatives in Europe to reach out to its southern neighbors in an attempt to strengthen relations, increase mutual understanding and combat mutual prejudices on both sides of the Mediterranean. There is a wide consensus on both shores that such initiatives are needed. Substantial human and financial resources are committed to these programs. But do we know if they work? And if they do work, do we know why? The answers to such questions remain inconclusive or, at best, ambiguous. Evaluations of the impact of these outreach and dialogue initiatives are rare. The intangibility of their results and impact make them inherently difficult to measure.

A qualitative study of seven Arab-Danish partnerships in DAPP conducted by DIIS in the first half of 2010 shed new light on key factors for success of an initiative that aims to build Arab-Danish social capital and combat mutual prejudices while supporting reform initiatives in the Arab world. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty Moroccan, Jordanian and Danish individuals who have personally been engaged in partnerships for at least two years. Six of the seven partnerships studied constitute links between professional peers (e.g. twinning between judges, journalists, human rights activists etc.).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Professional affinities provide a particularly fertile ground for enhancing cross-cultural relations and reducing mutual prejudices. In and of itself, however, it is not a panacea for increasing intercultural understanding.
- Cross-cultural relations require intercultural skills on the part of the persons involved. Individuals selected for participation in cross-cultural cooperation should possess explicit curiosity about other cultures, the ability to adapt their behavior to the demands of various social situations, a high level of self-awareness of their own cultural assumptions and the motivation to persist through – and learn from – the inevitable frustrations when norms and traditions collide.
- Personal relations are especially conducive to building trust and dismantling prejudices across cultures. The time and resources involved in informal meetings where mutual curiosities and mystifications can be explored should be encouraged and regarded as a natural part of the cross-cultural investment.
- A shared sense of reciprocity strengthens the relationship in cross-cultural partnerships and breeds trust. It is important that the understanding of 'what is in it' for each participant and 'why we are in it' is mutually accepted as valid by the partners.



The study showed noticeable modifications in mutual prejudices among partners, except in one partnership where stereotypical narratives lingered. The foundation for new social capital, in the form of trusting, personal relationships and genuine partnerships, was similarly established in all partnerships, except in the one mentioned above. Why did the majority of these partnerships succeed? And what was the source of the failure in this one particular case?

THE MERITS OF PROFESSIONAL AFFINITIES

DAPP is deliberately promoting partnerships between professional peers. The thought behind this method is that these types of partnerships are better placed to build cross-cultural bridges due to the shared platform provided by their profession. There is ample theoretical backing for this idea. ‘Likeness’ or ‘identification’ is highlighted as positive by scholars of diverse academic disciplines in combating stereotypes, developing trust and building genuine partnerships. This was also a finding in the study of the seven DAPP partnerships.

The professional affinities of DAPP partners allowed them to view their Arab or Danish counterparts as part of a professional ‘in-group’ as well as part of a cultural or national ‘out-group’. In this way partners benefit from the mutual trust of the professional in-group to explore and demystify characteristics of the cultural out-group.

Moreover, the mutual respect which developed between professional equals partly served to compensate for the inherent power imbalance in partnerships where the Danish partner controlled the budget. In literature on prejudice, the sense of equal status is an elementary precondition for intergroup meetings to be effective in reducing mutual prejudices. For international development scholars preoccupied with North-South partnerships, the sense of

equality between partners is essential in developing genuine partnerships.

In terms of combating prejudices, professional twinning arrangements have the further advantage of engaging individuals and organizations who are often strategically placed in society and who are not otherwise necessarily involved in international cooperation. Besides increasing the overall scope of intercultural people-to-people meetings, these professionals will have greater access to and credibility with other circles in their respective countries than ‘the usual suspects’ in international cooperation, thereby enhancing the indirect effect on society at large.

According to management scholars, building trusting working relations is also easier when professional affinities serves as a founding pillar. There is a predisposition to trust people from your own professional cadres, and it is easier to identify shared, mutually beneficial professional interests and to believe in common objectives. This clearly also applied to the international context of DAPP, where many partners explicitly referred to professional affinities as a basis for mutual trust and shared interests.

Are professional affinities the silver bullet to intercultural understanding and relation-building, then? Yes and no. Professional affinities do constitute an essential explanatory factor for the success of the DAPP partnerships we studied in building strong relationships and lowering mutual prejudices. But, no, professional affinities will not do the trick alone. The one partnership which was less successful in terms of ‘dialogue-results’ was a partnership between professional peers. This begs the question of what other factors worked in the majority of the DAPP partnerships we studied, while being absent or critical in the less successful partnership.

INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

Since partnership cooperation in DAPP always revolves around reform projects in the Arab world, the Arab DAPP partners generally felt that their Danish counterparts should respect and understand, or be interested to learn about, the broader social, economic, political, cultural and historical circumstances of the relevant sector, the Arab partner country and the Arab region as such. Danish partners were roughly divided into three categories by their Arab partners: 1) those who were seen as having insufficient knowledge about the region, the country and the sector of the particular partnership, and who were perceived as being uninterested in learning more. This was highly criticized by the Arab partners; 2) those who had very little knowledge about the Arab world, but demonstrated respect and a clear interest to learn. This was respected and welcomed by the Arab partners, and cited as a basis for building trust; and 3) those who had an intrinsic and comprehensive un-



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Many organisations work to promote dialogue between cultures - here is a small selection of logos.



Local politicians from Denmark, Jordan and Morocco exchange ideas at a conference in Copenhagen which aims to promote women in local politics. Photo: © Per Daugaard

derstanding of the Arab world. These partners were viewed extremely positively by the Arab partners as someone with whom a special rapport was possible.

When promoting partnerships between professional peers, it can be difficult to find candidates who fall in the third category, e.g. a professional judge who also happens to have lived part of her life in the Arab world and found an Arab spouse. However, it should be less difficult to find professionals in the second category of those who possess intercultural skills. Besides an interest in other cultures, intercultural skills should include a behavioral flexibility that allows the individual to adapt to the demands of different social situations, a high level of self-awareness of one's own cultural assumptions and the motivation to persist through inevitable frustrations. These were qualities that we generally found in the Danish partners within the successful partnerships.

PERSONAL RELATIONS

Well-established theories of social psychology predict that intergroup meetings will lower intergroup prejudices. Equally well-established theories in the management literature predict that interpersonal trust will increase exponentially with the number of personal meetings. It was therefore surprising to find that the one partnership where the Arab partners trusted their Danish counterpart the

least, and where mutual prejudices seemed to linger, was also the partnership where the partners had met the most often. Less developed intercultural skills on the part of the Danish partner might be one explanation for this. Another related explanation is found in the nature of these meetings. As opposed to the other partnerships we studied, the meetings in this particular partnership were kept strictly professional. Very little time had been invested in getting to know each other socially. This was, in fact, lamented by both sides, and for good reason, it seems: virtually all the other partners included in the study stressed the importance of personal relations in the partnership, which increased trust, eased communication and made it easier to deal with conflicting opinions or interests. Also, it made it less embarrassing to ask about explanations for conduct and situations that were not immediately understandable, thus avoiding the pitfall of resorting to stereotypical and often prejudice-enhancing explanations based on culture.

RECIPROCITY

Genuine reciprocity was singled out, especially by the Arab partners, as a crucial quality when it was present in their partnership and as an area for improvement if it was lacking. Genuine reciprocity based on a shared cause or mission was clearly faltering in many of the partnerships we studied. Most partners realized that the benefiting party was mainly the Arab partner, who received financial and



technical recourses from the Danish partner. This was not only the case in the partnership that was low on trust, but in most of the other partnerships, the partners had developed a shared understanding of the partners' respective benefits from the partnership. The perceived benefit of the Danish partner could, for instance, be to develop competencies about Arab culture which they found useful when dealing with Arab immigrants as part of their work in Denmark, or it could be to develop their professional network in the Arab region. In the partnership that was low on trust, there was no clear understanding among the Arab partners about the motives for the involvement of their Danish partner. It is impossible to say whether this should be seen as a consequence of the low trust bestowed in the Danish partner, or whether their trust suffered from the complete lack of reciprocity. Most likely, the two explanations go hand in hand. Clear reciprocal benefits, or at least an explicit, shared narrative in the partnership about 'what is in it' for each of the partners, removes grounds for speculation about ulterior motives, bolsters perceptions of the equal status of partners and breeds trust in the sincerity of partners' commitments to the partnership. Conversely, a trusted partner is probably also less likely to be suspected of ulterior motives.

ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSPARENCY AND JOINT DECISION MAKING STRUCTURES

The positive results of the DAPP partnerships we studied cannot be exclusively attributed to professional affinities, intercultural skills, the development of personal relations or a shared sense of reciprocity in the partnerships. Other factors important in developing trusting relations were observed in the different partnerships. Mutual visits to each other's countries and organizations were essential. A mutual understanding of the partner's internal decision-making structures and organizational capacities were important in order not to mistake low capacity or decision-making power with a lack of good intentions. Cooperation structures ensuring shared decision-making in the partnership also clearly mattered.

LESSONS LEARNED

It is essentially impossible to weigh one of the above-mentioned factors against any other in a generalized fashion. Many of them are related, although it is impossible to determine how with any accuracy. Furthermore, many other types of intercultural projects may have the same type of positive results for different reasons. The general lesson from the Danish Arab Partnership Program, however, is that mutual trust is an essential ingredient for the establishment of mutual understanding and of sustainable social and professional networks across culture. Trust takes time to build up, but it can be facilitated by professional kinship, intercultural skills, time spent on social activities and personal and organizational transparency about decision-making structures, as well as about the motives for being engaged in the particular project.

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NOTE: In November 2010, The Danish-Arab Partnership Program changed name to 'Partnership for Dialogue and Reform'. The type of partnerships described in this brief, however, continue unchanged.

FURTHER READING

Wegter, Marie-Louise and Karina Pultz: "Dialoguing Partnerships: An Analysis of The Dialogue Assumptions of The Danish Partnership for Dialogue and Reform", *DIIS Report 2010:09*.