

## Impact Objectives

- Understand the positive and negative effects of socioeconomic, sociodemographic, ethnic, and cultural diversity for society, the city and the urban economy
- Improve the knowledge base for policy makers on different levels (EU, national, local) by translating the project results into innovative instruments and arrangements

# A pathway to improving Europe's social cohesion

*Gideon Bolt was the Coordinator of DIVERCITIES, a recently completed project that sought to improve social cohesion, social mobility and economic performance in today's hyperdiversified cities. He explains the importance of investigating the diversity of populations and how this latest work will move Europe towards better social cohesion*



**Can you begin by introducing yourself and telling us how you became the Project Coordinator of DIVERCITIES?**

I am an urban geographer, specialised in the fields of residential segregation, urban renewal and poverty neighbourhoods. My colleague Ronald van Kempen, Tuna Tasan-Kok (University of Amsterdam) and I wrote a research proposal called *Governing Urban Diversity: Creating Social Cohesion, Social Mobility and Economic Performance in Today's Hyper-diversified Cities (DIVERCITIES)*. The Funding Scheme was the Framework Programme Seven for Research & Innovation in Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities – Collaborative project Activity 2 – Combining economic, social and environmental objectives. Ronald van Kempen was the Project Coordinator from the start but, to our great shock, we lost him in February 2016 when he passed away after a short period of disease. I subsequently took over the role.

**What is it about cities that fascinates you?**

I have always been interested in spatial inequalities within the city. A city contains many different types of areas, which represent different worlds. There are gated communities for the rich, deteriorated areas

for the poor, ethnic enclaves for immigrant groups, etc. But, if you look more closely at neighbourhoods, you will almost always see that they are much more diverse than you would expect at first sight. For me, an interesting question is how people deal with diversity. Do they engage with different others, or do they tend to withdraw as much as possible and only allow people that are similar to themselves in their social circle?

**Why do you think it has become so important to research the increasing economic, social and cultural diversity across Europe's urban populations?**

There is a long scholarly tradition in which diversity is seen as a problem. Almost 80 years ago, Louis Wirth argued in his essay 'Urbanism as a Way of Life' that the heterogeneity of cities weakens the social cohesion of our society. More recently, Robert Putnam's 2007 publication *E pluribus unum* triggered a lot of discussions on his finding that diversity leads to less trust in out-groups, as well as in-groups. This idea relates to the notion of a parallel society, which has popped up in many policy discourses across Europe: people may live close to each other, but this does not necessarily mean that they have any contact with each other or take part in joint activities. Our basic assumption is that social outcomes, like social cohesion, social mobility and economic performance, are

not affected by diversity in a deterministic way. Positive and negative effects of diversity are (at least partly) related to governance arrangements.

**How do you envision DIVERCITIES will help Europe move towards better social cohesion and social mobility?**

In our recently published Handbook for policy makers we draw out the key factors that shape the success (or failure) of the policy initiatives. These initiatives aim to increase social cohesion, economic performance and social mobility of individuals and groups, and identify the barriers and opportunities to the implementation of successful urban policy programmes in other cities.

**Finally, what is DIVERCITIES looking to achieve in the future?**

Although the project was completed in February 2017, we will keep the website active in order to disseminate new publications. Alongside that, I expect that all the partners involved in DIVERCITIES will be working together in various combinations in future research projects.



# The benefits of diversity

*The challenges faced by urban policy makers and institutions in meeting the demands of Europe's increasingly diverse population are both numerous and complex. With that in mind, the recently completed **DIVERCITIES** project examined the specific ways in which Europe can benefit from diversity*

The four-year DIVERCITIES (Governing Urban Diversity: Creating Social Cohesion, Social Mobility and Economic Performance in Today's Hyper-diversified Cities) project, which began in March 2013 and ended in February, explored the value of diversity in cities. Coordinated by Utrecht University's Faculty of Geosciences, the principal aim of DIVERCITIES was to examine the ways in which Europe can benefit from diversity. The central hypothesis was that urban diversity is an asset, and is something that should be encouraged, not stopped.

The project was structured around three core goals. Firstly, the team wanted to provide convincing evidence on the positive contribution of diversity to the crucial outcomes of social cohesion, economic performance and social mobility; secondly, they wanted to analyse the role of existing policies and governance arrangements in promoting beneficial aspects of urban diversity; and thirdly, they wanted to improve the knowledge base for policy makers on different levels (EU, national, local) by translating the results of this project into innovative instruments and arrangements.

Importantly, policies and governance arrangements do not merely have an effect on diversity; they also play a crucial role in mediating the effects of diversity. It is therefore not enough to characterise diversity as negative or positive – it is important to consider its effect in the context of policy. As such, one of the most significant questions in the project was how policies can and governance arrangements lead to better solutions in terms of social cohesion, economic performance and social mobility.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HYPERDIVERSITY

The investigation was carried out in 11 EU and three non-EU field research cities, including Antwerp, Athens, Budapest, Copenhagen, Istanbul, Leipzig, London, Milan, Paris, Rotterdam, Tallinn, Toronto, Warsaw and Zurich. Project Coordinator Assistant Professor Gideon Bolt is keen to highlight the ways in which the project moves away from other studies on diversity. 'As we argue that diversification is a process that is not only related to immigration, we go one step further and use the term hyperdiversity,' he explains. 'With this term,

we aim to make clear that we should not only look at diversity in ethnic, demographic and socioeconomic terms, but also look to the differences that exist with respect to lifestyles, attitudes and activities.'

Alongside their hypotheses, the team focused on conducting empirical work that was divided into four different Work Packages (WPs). WP1 focused on policy research where, through document analysis and interviews with policy persons, they identified how diversity is embedded within contemporary urban policy programmes. WP2 analysed governance arrangement; in each city, the team selected ten initiatives aimed at stimulating social cohesion, social mobility and economic performance. Through interviews and document analysis, they assessed how diversity was used in a positive way to meet the objectives of the arrangement. WP3 involved interviewing inhabitants and at least 50 residents in each city were questioned in order to get insight into their perceptions about diversity and the role diversity plays in stimulating social

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cohesion and social mobility. Finally, WP4 involved interviewing entrepreneurs; at least 40 were interviewed to assess the role of diversity in their economic performance.

#### LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM LOCAL ACTIONS

In most countries, the team saw a shift towards assimilation policies, particularly at the national level. However, city authorities have been shown to adopt more inclusive forms of integration policies, and to employ a more positive discourse towards diversity. ‘There is a clear trend towards a more pragmatic approach to diversity in which positive aspects of difference for competitiveness and social cohesion is stressed,’ observes Bolt. ‘The local pragmatism can be related to the fact that it is the cities where the consequences of immigration are most visible.’ For city authorities, diversity is much more of a given than for their local counterparts, so it is something that has to be accommodated. Rather than focus on ideological debates, city authorities are far more likely to focus on coping with more concrete issues. Interestingly, the team believe that cities can learn from the local grassroots initiatives they examined. Many local initiatives deliberately build on diversity to achieve their goals, and attempt to foster social cohesion by enabling positive exchanges between diverse people.

#### EDUCATION PROGRAMMES FOR THE FUTURE

One of the most important outcomes of the project has been the designing of an Educational Programme that consists of a range of assignments. These assignments are aimed at students and give them the opportunity to learn about different aspects of diversity. Students design and conduct research in the classroom and within their school’s neighbourhood about how apparent diversity is. Based on their own

The DIVERCITIES collaboration has produced in-depth reports from the research cities, known as City Reports. These include a critical analysis of urban policies on diversity, governance arrangements and initiatives, how social mobility and cohesion is impacted by policy, and the economic impact of urban diversity. More information can be found at <https://www.urbandivercities.eu/publications/city-reports/>

research, students propose an initiative that aims to make the neighbourhood more liveable and harmonious. The inspiration for this assignment comes from examples of neighbourhood projects around the world. The programme is available in 10 different languages. Importantly, these schoolchildren will one day be able to cast their own vote, have their own say, and perhaps understand the value of a diverse society, thereby benefiting each and every individual socially, culturally and economically.



Antwerp: Protest art on the streets of Borgerhout. David Wills

## Project Insights

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### PARTNERS

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**Assistant Professor Gideon Bolt** is an Urban Geographer at the Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University. His research focuses on urban policy, social cohesion, residential segregation and neighbourhoods. He has been guest editor for several peer-reviewed journals in the fields of urban and housing issues.



The founding DIVERCITIES Coordinator, **Ronald van Kempen**, sadly passed away in 2016.

The DIVERCITIES

consortium would like to acknowledge his valuable contribution to this project and the inspiration he brought to this important work.



Utrecht University



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