

Introduction

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The title of the Siena Group seminar held on 5 and 6 June 1997 in Neuchâtel, Switzerland was “On the way to a multicultural society?” Why the topic was set in question form calls for a preliminary explanation. It goes without saying that modern societies and states are multicultural in the sense that they are home to various population groups with different cultural backgrounds. This is not just a modern phenomenon: different (linguistic, religious or ethnic) groups and minorities have existed at all stages of our history. But now global streams of migration and the intensification of international information flows have changed the nature of the problems in individual cultures and states.

Thus, the issue cannot focus on the existence of cultural diversity in itself but rather on the extent to which this coming together of different cultures results in fruitful cooperation, peaceful, level-headed coexistence or conflict.

The Neuchâtel meeting made it clear that the coexistence of traditional minorities is not in the forefront of discussions. Even though the contrasts between these groups sometimes suddenly flare up into violence, these are not the relationships which are seen in most countries as the most pressing problem of multiculturalism. The priority subject of investigation lies more in the meeting between native populations and immigrants. In this connection, the question which immediately springs to mind is how the group of immigrants should be defined in the first place, in view of the diverse geographical origins, different lengths of stay and differing naturalization practices in countries of immigration. In this context, Neuchâtel produced key points of departure for definitions, though definitive clarification is a future task of other international statistical bodies.

The relationship between immigrants and the local population is primarily viewed in categories of conflict. The “invasion” of one’s own world by “aliens” is often felt to be a threat, triggering corresponding reactions: nationalism, racism and xenophobia are the keywords in this context. On the other hand, the immigrant groups are in a typical minority situation, with limited opportunities and rights of access to social positions and economic resources, restricted chances of living “their” life to the full and relations of conflict with the majority culture.

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Thus, the discussion of the problems of social inequality provoked by the coming together and cohabitation of different cultural groups is always an element in monitoring multiculturalism. Consequently, in Neuchâtel also, discussions focussed on the topics of integration and discrimination, exclusion and cohesion, participation and marginalization, adaptation and deviance.

The meeting highlighted the relevance of three areas in particular: language, work and education. Language, because it is an important cultural identity medium, on the one hand, and a tool for promoting understanding and communication access to the host society, on the other. Work, as a place of integration, of discourse and of procurement of the material assets which are decisive for establishing social position. And education, as an opportunity for cultural intermingling and acquiring intellectual resources which are a vital prerequisite for the success of individual participation strategies.

The design of official statistical concepts, categories, definitions and methods is not always geared to recording the process-based events involved in multiculturalism. Many components of statistical methodology are designed for analyzing structures and data stocks and have to be revised, or at least re-interpreted, in order to study integration and discrimination processes. This is an additional important future task for the appropriate international statistical bodies.

The debate in Neuchâtel fitted into the tradition established for Siena Group meetings. The Group, founded in 1993, by Paolo Garonna, Director General of the Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT), dedicates its 2-day informal meeting to developing social statistics, social reporting and social accounting. Some 40 experts from various countries and international organizations (UN/ECE, Eurostat, OECD) discussed general developments in social statistics (1993 in Siena and 1994 in Stockholm) or specific topics such as youth and integration (1995 in Oslo) or intergenerational relations and social mobility (1996 in Paris).

This special issue of the "Statistical Journal" on the annual Siena Group Meeting – the third of its kind – contains key excerpts and papers from the Neuchâtel seminar. The Journal thus takes on the vital task of communicating the creative and innovative elements that are the hallmark of the Siena Group discussions to the world of official statistics, the aim being to encourage further development work. In this connection, the UN/ECE and the Journal publishers are doing essential work with an eye to the future.

The next Siena Group Meeting will be held in December 1998 in Sydney, at the invitation of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The topic will be "Families in the 21st century" and the Group will be looking at questions such as how families are formed, their economic and supportive role as well as methodological and conceptual problems.