

**"Intercultural cooperation and concerted-action at the  
grassroots"  
results of a research-action project of the Intercultural Institute of  
Montreal**

**Project genesis**

Taking action within a pluralistic society! For close to four decades now, the Intercultural Institute of Montreal has undertaken social actions that reflect its own particular intercultural philosophy and practices. Since IIM's inception, persons, families and communities, as well as the living environment and people's daily lives and experiences, have constituted the elements on which the organization's philosophy and actions are based. Social action within the context of cultural, religious and racial diversity is conceived through the dynamics of these social spaces. A variety of programs aimed at members of the general public of all ages and origins – community actors, professionals within diverse institutional milieus, etc. – have contributed to the articulation of intercultural approaches to research-action.

In 1994, IIM examined the state of intercultural relations within the social movements and community development in Quebec. To what extent do communities of diverse origins participate in the networks of community actions and associations? What initiatives have been taken to build bridges between these communities that compose contemporary Quebec society? What is the nature of community discourse with respect to cultural pluralism? Such questions prompted IIM to undertake several types of activities. These activities included research-action projects, notably, consultation of some 60 Quebecois, multiethnic and ethnocultural organizations in the Mile End and Park Extension districts (1995-96 report), an intercultural-neighbourhood project employing an intergenerational approach (1996-97), and a survey of two women's groups and a number of ethnocultural communities conducted for the purpose of better focussing our examination of intercultural relations at the community level (1997-98).

In 1998, IIM implemented a program entitled "Social Movements and Cultural Pluralism" and our current research-action project, "Development of Intercultural Modalities for Cooperation at the Grassroots," is part of this program.

**Project objectives and processes**

We brought together a dozen persons from women's groups, multiethnic/multicultural organizations, community organizations made up of old stock Quebec francophones, and ethnocultural organizations. The project had three principal objectives. First, participants were invited to share their experiences and perceptions regarding intercultural relations among the different communities. Second, we encouraged people to discuss the obstacles and difficulties that arise with regard to taking concerted action in the context of cultural diversity. Third, participants were asked to attempt to identify approaches

that would foster conditions and modalities favourable to intercultural joint action.

In conducting this research-action project, we adopted a focus-group approach. Here I wish to discuss our interpretation of the concepts of “research-action” and “focus group.” Rather than constituting a research-action endeavour in the conventional and academic sense, this focus-group project was intended to serve as a means to implement an interactive dialogue process in order to foster mutual understanding between the different participants. At the same time, we wished to gain from the experience a corpus of information and lessons in order to articulate the knowledge and know-how that are specific to the grass roots. It is also hoped that focus-group participation will, in itself, facilitate learning with respect to a concrete experience of intercultural communication and working together.

### **Lessons learned**

The process was a very rich and fertile one with regard to the quality of participation of the group members and the interaction between them, as well as with regard to the ideas and points of view put forward in the discussion sessions. The three focus groups (consisting of four or five persons each) were highly heterogeneous in terms of the persons’ cultural origin, as well as the mission and activities of the different organizations they represented. Points of convergence and divergence are obvious in the data gathered. To give a brief idea of the information gathered and the knowledge communicated by participants, the three major points of convergence can be summed up as follows:

- a) a critical view of the current concerted-action and partnership process;
- b) a willingness among participants to further commit themselves to identifying and creating conditions more favourable to cooperation and working together in the context of cultural diversity;
- c) the realization that cultural gaps exist and that cultural differences are a key factor that must be taken into account with regard to concerted-action.

Being rooted in a particular culture is extremely important to any organization, whether it be an organization comprised of old stock francophones or a service organization. This matter of cultural roots is a determining factor even in the case of an organization whose mission is to defend people’s rights.

It would be interesting to conduct an in-depth analysis of these data using a convergence-divergence framework, but such an analysis is not possible in the context of this report. What follows is a summary of the ideas and opinions expressed with regard to the three specific points of convergence mentioned above.

#### **a) Critical view of concerted-action**

There was general outspoken discontent regarding the state of collaborative action. All the participants were strongly critical of the current situation in this

regard. Some even expressed the opinion that concerted-action has become a catchall term.

Furthermore, from the moment the matter of joint action is raised, discussion centers around relations with the State. It seems that the State's influence is so pervasive that people have great difficulty distancing themselves from it in order to better articulate their discontent. They have considerable trouble talking about concerted action other than in connection with the State and its institutions and thus criticism constantly revolves around the role played by the State and its institutions. This criticism involves two specific subjects: subcontracting and community organizations' lack of autonomy. All financing is accompanied by a mandate, which leads to subcontracting and compromises organizations' autonomy with respect to their own mission. What is at issue is recognition of, and the legitimacy of, their expertise and knowledge and, second, inequitable distribution of financial resources.

Where old stock Quebec organizations and organizations that defend rights are concerned, joint action takes the form of negotiations with the State. Ethnocultural organizations, for their part, view the process first and foremost as one involving persons and groups within the diverse communities on one side and members of the old stock community on the other. To describe these forms of concerted action, IIM has introduced two concepts: verticality and horizontality. These concepts appear to have helped stimulate reflection on the subject. It is important to note here that the participants from ethnocultural organizations also expressed the discontent about finding themselves in a vertical relationship vis-à-vis old stock Quebec federations of community organizations.

In light of this reflection, the different communities' primary challenge and mission is to address the urgent need to better articulate a more inclusive discourse based on horizontality and to orient their actions accordingly.

#### b) Willingness and powerlessness

In the three discussion groups, there was an obvious desire to seriously reflect upon these questions concerning the collaborative-action process and to deal directly with intercultural issues with a view to improving relations between communities of diverse origins. At the same time, the greatest obstacles to such an improvement in relations are seen as: a lack of financial and human resources, work overload (lack of time), and enormous cultural, religious and racial diversity.

In the face of these obstacles, old stock community organizations and ethnocultural communities stated that they felt rather powerless.

With respect to diversity, the two groups differ in terms of the kinds of issues they raise, for example, regarding the majority-minority relationship, integration, citizenship, and the social project in Quebec in the political sense. Thus, their concerns vary.

Both sides demonstrate openness to diversity, but the operational structure of community organizations and groups is such that conditions are not favourable to supporting such openness. All participants are extremely motivated in terms of seeking ways to respond to the challenges facing them.

### c) Cultural gaps

This research-action project seems to have served to better clarify the nature of the cultural gaps and differences that exist within the different communities with regard to a vision of social action.

One of the most important points to be made is that social action in Quebec is driven by politically-based activity within the framework of a power relationship with the state. This fundamental reality affects, in one way or another, all social movements. Ethnocultural organizations, for their part, show a greater tendency to position themselves differently, i.e. to take a more social than political position with a view to establishing ties with the old stock and other communities and thereby be able to find their rightful place within the adopted society.

Another gap is also worthy of mention: ethnocultural organizations say that they have their own methods of organization, their own ways of providing services to members of their community and doing social action with culturally different approaches, and they expect these differences to be recognized by other groups, organizations and institutions. In their opinion, non-recognition of the knowledge and know-how of ethnocultural communities is the cause of many misunderstandings that arise in the course of concerted action.

Meanwhile, old stock community organizations consider that ethnocultural organizations and their communities are insufficiently informed of, and sensitized to, the culture of social movements in Quebec.

Thus, it appears that the focus-group participants have been increasingly sensitive to the conditions necessary for effective collaboration and joint action. In particular, they cite mutual awareness and recognition of each other's knowledge and know-how.

This is the most constructive and realistic way to establish relations that can foster cooperation and concerted action.

### **Courses of action open to IIM**

Courses of action open to IIM involve two considerations. First, with the pending announcement of a bill to be tabled in the Quebec National Assembly regarding autonomous community action, it is more urgent than ever that the community sector articulate its social identity independent of the state system. This research-action project has pointed out issues that can not be easily tackled in a relationship of verticality with the state. The communities should therefore answer certain questions: do we seek to share the state's power or to assert the power that the social spaces and the communities have?

Second consideration: the results of this research-action clearly indicate to us that all the participants believe it is necessary to reflect upon what approaches to adopt with regard to the question of concerted-action between the various communities.

These considerations lead IIM to contemplate certain follow-up measures to this project, all the while bearing in mind that its primary objective is community regeneration in an intercultural context. It is not empowerment by an official delegation that constitutes the mechanism of this regeneration but rather the reappropriating of power that has been delegated and relinquished to the state. Thus, what we are talking about is "radical" democracy at the base<sup>1</sup> and what Touraine calls "cultural democracy"<sup>2</sup>.

In concrete terms, IIM will continue its actions: it will form a reflection-and-action group with regard to the question of articulating a community discourse on concerted-action and cultural pluralism. IIM pledges to lead this group. Furthermore, IIM will serve as resource for information and sensitization on the social and community movements as well as on interculturalism. Lastly, IIM plans to launch specific group projects that will involve individuals and community organizations that wish to work together.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy*, Cornell University Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Touraine, *Qu'est-ce que la démocratie?*, Fayard, 1994.