

Access to social services – how to overcome socio-cultural barriers

Stockholm, September 10, 2013

Socio-cultural barriers affecting access to social services and examples of how to overcome them in Sweden and in Nicaragua were discussed this morning at Medelhavsmuseet. In a joint seminar by the Swedish Water House and SIWI's Water Governance Facility, representatives from research, local politics and NGOs shared their perspectives, and common concerns linked across contextualized cases.

Gregor Kweik, ethnologist and representative of Stockholm County's Administrative Board, opened the morning with a historical contextualization of Romani migration and discrimination. Highlighting diversity among Romani people, he also described a historical pattern still relevant today of overall discrimination against Romani people channeled through both prejudice and legislation. This has contributed to separation of Romani communities from the rest of society. Gregor discussed how "the effects of exclusion on culture" include people hiding Romani identity as expressed through dress codes and – in the case of Sweden – a lack of tradition of education.

Next to speak was Marta Anderson Ordoñez from the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN). Member of a research team that currently collaborates with WGF at SIWI, Marta stayed in Stockholm after the World Water Week to take part in today's seminar. She presented an overview of Nicaragua's many social and economic development issues with focus on the problems affecting six different groups of indigenous people and Afrodescendants living in the coastal region. This includes low investments and lack of services for basic living conditions; for example, rich water resources but lack of clean drinking water. With a Spanish-based school system, education becomes more difficult for the groups who grow up with different mother tongues. Marta also put light on the fact that the six groups are diverse, and not free from hierarchies, yet discrimination affect all indigenous and afrodescendant groups. URACCAN's work include efforts to protect the different cultures and languages, and Marta proposed a few key factors of what is needed for a better future for the different groups, including local control over natural resources.

Paki Holvander concluded the speakers' presentations. Paki works as a strategist of democracy and diversity questions in Södertälje, 40 minutes outside of Stockholm, where 80 languages are spoken and 47% of the 90.000 inhabitants are born outside of or have parents born outside of Sweden. Paki highlighted the value of diversity in workplaces for creativity and through tolerance. She pointed at demographic changes that make immigration necessary for the EU to maintain its population and preserve the welfare, and argued for the need to promote Sweden in the face of these and other local and global changes. Paki further illustrated how socio-cultural differences in society today are a

fact, which can create barriers if ignored but that generates positive effects if coupled with tolerance. With a creative challenge to the audience, she effectively showed us our own preconceived assumptions – ground for socio-cultural barriers - and the value to think outside of the box. In the end, Paki concluded “It’s all about human rights”.

After a sunny coffee break the speakers were joined for a panel discussion by Tiberiu Lacatus, EU Advisor from Stadsmissionen at Crossroad. Since 2011 they provide information and support to new arrivals to Sweden, many of whom are Romani. The joint discussion centred on integration, where Paki suggested the difference between connected intercultural vs. multicultural but segregated societies. The speakers all shared examples of practical work successful for integration and discussed the audience questions concerning the gap between law and implementation, how to deal with local authorities when groups of people are denied access to services, and how to relate to the balance between cultural distinction and cultural discrimination. With different perspectives and contextualized examples, the speakers shared a mutual focus on diversity and discrimination, connected to issues of language and identity. Lack of knowledge and interaction as a source of assumptions, prejudice, exclusion and discrimination was highlighted by all, and the seminar morning concluded with a confirmation of the value of interaction and dialogue.

/Lisa Backman for Swedish Water House