Everybody’s Business: the role that business can play in supporting cohesive communities

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Author(s)
Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network, with input from the Intercultural Cities Unit and Network (ICC).

Aims

This policy brief explores how business can play a role in supporting social cohesion. It also explores how policymakers may effectively collaborate with businesses to achieve this purpose. The brief was produced by Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network, for the Council of Europe Intercultural Cities programme (ICC).

Methodology

A series of roundtable conversations was held with several local authorities and business representatives. The purpose was to bring stakeholders together to share their experiences and thoughts about good practice in terms of how business can help foster community cohesion. The conversations took place in the following areas: Swansea, Manchester, Kirklees, Bradford, Calderdale, and Leeds. The brief also draws on the experience of the ICC-UK network more broadly.

Key issues

The authors state that business has a responsibility in terms of promoting and achieving social cohesion in the community. They describe the importance of workplaces as an important locus for social connection between people of different backgrounds, and how some businesses by their nature have a key community role as they provide meeting spaces locally. They can also promote cohesion by supporting local organisations that connect people. It is hoped that further work will be undertaken to advance this agenda.

The brief also provides examples of successful initiatives implemented during the pandemic that may inspire local authorities and businesses. For instance:

- The DIVERSITY = INNOVATION Network in Kirklees which brings together local employers to work on diversity in the workplace.
- An Inclusive Employers Toolkit developed by Grant Thornton in partnership with Bradford Council.

Recommendations

Participants in the roundtable conversations agreed on the potential of businesses and workplaces to operate as ‘engines’ of social cohesion and as community partners. The authors make three sets of recommendations based on these conversations and the experience of the ICC-UK network.

Business as an engine of social cohesion

The brief highlights that business and workplaces can bring people from diverse backgrounds and different communities together, providing a space for social connection. They can maximise this opportunity to support social cohesion by:

- Ensuring their staff team is diverse.
- Taking an approach of ‘cohesion-aware management’.
- Ensuring business innovation is informed by market research in local communities, and offering more product innovation opportunities, particularly for people in under-represented groups.
- Considering how to make any community meeting spaces that they provide as part of their business more inclusive and welcoming.

Business can also act as a community partner supporting cohesion by:

- Offering sponsorship and in-kind donations – ways to maximise the value of this could be long-term partnerships between business and local charities or groups, or setting up charitable foundations.
- Promoting volunteering activities that help to connect their employees with the community.
- Applying the ‘think local’ principle to their supply chains.
- Implementing mechanisms for evaluating their cohesion impact.

Local authorities should get more involved in encouraging businesses to play their role in promoting social cohesion. The authors recommends that they should:

- Take leadership by raising awareness of this issue among businesses, and developing a strategy in partnership with businesses and community groups. They should also effectively coordinate efforts, to ensure needs are met, and to avoid duplication and silo-working.
- Find ways to incentivise businesses to support social cohesion, such as through approaches to procurement and social value, and recognition of businesses’ success in promoting cohesion.
- Establish an effective evaluation framework

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