

137th IPU Assembly

St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, 15 October 2017

Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue

Keynote speech by Rita Izsák-Ndiaye

Madame President, distinguished delegates, dear participants,

It is a real honor and pleasure to be here today, especially in a city and country with such unbelievably rich culture and diversity, and share my thoughts with you about a topic that is so close to my heart.

We live today in an increasingly connected and globalized world with our identities becoming more complex, multi-layered and fluid than ever before. We hold different nationalities, religions, beliefs, traditions and cultures which often link us not to one but to multiple communities. We speak many languages, even at the same time, our food and music preferences, our styles and attitudes are being inspired from all over the globe, also thanks to our interconnectedness via the Internet. And very importantly, the opportunities and spaces for people from diverse backgrounds to meet, interact, co-work, to form friendship and fall in love are widening at an incredibly rapid pace. So in this new era of closer co-existence we must equip ourselves with the ability, knowledge, understanding and right attitudes to live together and foster a culture of pluralism, harmony, and peace.

So how can we actually do that? How can States successfully manage millions of different people on their territory? Where and at what level do we start? Luckily, science teaches us an important thing in this regard: in order to understand how the large operates, we must analyze how the smaller elements function within. Cells in the human body number in the trillions and come in all shapes and sizes and we know that no matter the differences, cells of the body depend on one another, either directly or indirectly, to keep the body functioning as one unit. So what are the components of our society? According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, society means “an enduring and cooperating social group whose members have developed organized patterns of relationships through interaction with one another”. So let’s take a look at the level of families and our immediate environment, which includes our spouses, colleagues, extended family members, friends, neighbors and others, with whom we are managing our relationships on a daily basis. And let’s turn to science again and get some tips and tricks that researchers identified as the tokens of happy and successful marriages and relationships¹. Let me share with you a few of these important principles:

1. *Do not try to change each other*: Therapists say that the most successful couples are the ones who recognize and appreciate the differences between them and their partner.
2. *Revisit the past*: The strongest couples have the ability to skip over the bad parts of their history and focus on positive memories and times they shared.

¹ Inspired by the following articles: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-4270544/The-ten-secrets-long-happy-marriage.html>, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/daily-living/keeping-romance-alive/ten-secrets-to-a-successful-marriage>

3. *Always listen to each other and take decisions together*: Yes, the importance of listening can not be overestimated. And you might want to remember that not siding with the person your partner is venting about is key too.
4. *If problems persist, approach them differently*: Wise couples know that with new and creative approaches, you can get different results. Often even minor changes in behavior, attitude or actions make the biggest difference at the end.
5. *A crisis does not mean a marriage is over*: A crisis can indeed bring a whole new beginning. It's often out of pain that great bonds are made.
6. And last but not least, a personal favorite advice: *Love is a verb, not a feeling*. Feelings, like happiness, will fluctuate. But real love is based on the couple's vows and commitment: to stick to each other "for better or for worse".

So if these are prerequisites of successful inter-personal relationships, can we apply them to inter-cultural relations within society at large? Yes, sure, we can. And fortunately, we are not without some help and guidance on our journey. Various agreements, standards, established rights and duties, as well as centuries of history with good and bad lessons learnt exist to guide us in how to ensure our peaceful, dignified and successful co-existence. Let us see how the above principles are to be applied to our society as a whole:

1. Our first principle was '*do not try to change each other*': Indeed, according to international norms, forcing communities to give up their distinct language, religion, culture, identity, or traditions, is unlawful. Moreover, national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities have a right to have their identity protected and promoted by the State they live in. Good governance requires a set of legal, administrative and territorial arrangements that are made to allow peaceful and constructive group accommodation based on equality in dignity and rights for all.
2. *Revisit the past*: There is not a single country which has not gone through some forms of inter-ethnic or inter-religious clashes in its past. Tensions, conflicts and wars tear the social fabric, cause long-lasting pain and can make dialogue hard within and between nations. And because it is the winners who interpret and write the history, where there has been conflict, the culture, history and traditions of the less powerful and minority groups have often been subject to distorted representations, resulting in low self-esteem within the groups and negative stereotypes towards members of the group on the part of the wider community. So we must write our history together and acknowledge the contributions of each community to our common cultural, traditional, national and international heritage and find the common values and commitments that keep us together.
3. *Always listen to each other and make decisions together*: Disadvantaged communities often carry limited or no political, economic, social and media power and are hence left out from vital discussions so their voices often do not get heard. As the Indian writer, Arundhati Roy says: "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." Just like in a marriage, also in public matters, we must express our own views and feelings freely and genuinely and let others express their own freely and genuinely too, knowing that progress is only possible when parties understand and appreciate each other. Therefore, it is vital that minorities are included in all decision-making processes, including in municipal and government structures, law enforcement bodies, the judiciary, legislative bodies,

criminal justice systems and other authorities, especially when their decisions affect them. Without their participation, such bodies are less able to make vital decisions in a way that benefits the entire society, and they will also be less trusted by minorities, who might be reluctant to access them, or discouraged from doing so.

4. *If problems persist, approach them differently:* It is often a matter of creative solutions that fosters dialogue and strengthens cooperation between the different communities. There are myriads of political, legal and social tools to fight against prejudices, bigotry, hatred, misrepresentation and to reinforce respect and tolerance for each other. Young people especially should be encouraged to inspire and take such actions as through arts, social media and their uniquely free and open interactions, they can find innovative ways to build understanding, celebrate diversity and strengthen peace.
5. *A crisis does not mean a marriage is over:* Tensions within and between States have arisen in the past creating a difficult political atmosphere, both internally and internationally. However, in such times, various agreements and treaties can be established between the State and the affected communities which should be based on universal and regional instruments relating to equality, non-discrimination and minority rights, including provisions for the settlement of disputes regarding their implementation. Transitional justice processes, truth-seeking, reparations and reforms can lay new and strengthened foundations for more inclusive and resilient societies.
6. *And last but not least: Love is a verb, not a feeling.* In time of peace and harmony, we must not become idle and passive believing that it will naturally last forever. There are various triggers which in times of even slight instability can turn events rapidly worse. Therefore, we must take action, actively, tirelessly, vigilantly and constantly to ensure that all members of the society feel that they are heard, included, cared for and respected. Vows and agreements that have been taken in good times must be honored and respected in troubled times as well.

Let us be honest. Our challenge today in establishing true and functioning inclusive societies and cultural pluralism is not of a legal and it is not of an intellectual nature. It is clear what we must do. We must ensure there is appropriate legislation, starting from the Constitutions, which lays the foundations for human rights and fundamental freedoms, which prohibits and sanctions discrimination, incitement to hatred, hate crimes and in the worst cases, mass atrocity crimes. There must be mechanisms available to hold perpetrators of such crimes accountable. Inclusive bodies and institutions must be established that are in charge of intercultural dialogue, minority protection and have the authority to develop necessary integration and affirmative action policies, programs and actions with the required budgets. Minorities must be part of decision-making bodies and should have secured representations in the parliaments. We are aware of the need of inclusive educational curriculums that highlight the values, cultures and contributions of the different communities to our national heritage and society, as well as the importance of human rights education and development of critical thinking. It is clear that we need smarter immigration policies that do not put thousands of persons in otherwise preventable dangers and which do not push many receiving countries to respond so harshly and insensitively. We are aware that public figures and opinion leaders must act as role models and publicly reject any signs and manifestations of intolerance at the earliest possible stage. We know all this.

I repeat, our challenges are not legal or intellectual. International legal norms and standards are clear and we are aware of them. The barriers in the way are personal and political. Personal because we have to change our own attitudes. In the era of disarmament, we should not only talk about weaponry, but about disarming our own fear, suspicion, feelings of insecurity, or ignorance about others. And barriers are political, because what divides us are often political party lines and ideological debates which can feel so out of context and reality. Moreover, there are many political leaders who are not willing and ready to be confronted by dissenting opinions and criticism. And so, being aware of how bizarre it sounds in a session of parliamentarians, we do need to depoliticize the issue of tolerance and inclusion. Politicians can and should argue about such matters as tax reforms, infrastructural regulations or how we imagine the next 100 years of space exploration. But no one should be allowed to ever question equality and dignity, together with our right to identity, of every single member of the society.

The 2012 Quebec City Declaration adopted by the 127th IPU Assembly calls for a number of important measures that parliaments and parliamentarians should take in order to protect diversity both nationally and internationally, including in the field of legislation, policy-making and education. And it underlines that you, distinguished Parliamentarians, with your diverse constituencies have the real potential to be the natural sentinels of peace. You can decide to actively reach out and include members of minority communities into your parties and by working closely together, you can have better chances to win their trust and cooperation. You can initiate and incorporate social debate through parliamentary discussions and decisions. You can work together with local and religious leaders in the struggle against fundamentalism that can inflame tensions and lead to violence. By exercising your budgetary oversight capacity, you can prevent the funding of projects and organizations that promote hatred and intolerance.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Minorities which provides a unique and timely opportunity to reflect on the past achievements and to look forward to identify ways to further strengthen international standards on minority rights protection. In its preamble, the Declaration states that the promotion and protection of minority rights contribute to the political and social stability of States and emphasizes that the constant promotion and realization of such rights is an integral part of the development of society and contributes to the strengthening of friendship and cooperation among peoples and States.

Let me conclude with the most basic article of human rights which lays the foundation of our togetherness. It is the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and please consider its words carefully: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood". With this, I wish all of us a fruitful Assembly in a hope that we will commit ourselves to continue shaping our common future with reason and conscience and in a spirit of real sister- and brotherhood.

Thank you!