

May 2007 - Koenraad Debackere, Chairman Living Stone Centre for Intercultural Entrepreneurship and CEO K.U.Leuven, explains the strategic importance to further research intercultural dynamics for both the university and society.

Interculturalism needs a compass indeed ... Introduction to ‘Compass for Intercultural Relationships’¹

Koenraad Debackere

European society is currently confronted with tremendous intercultural challenges, both at home and in its relationships with the many members of an increasingly global world. The nature and the sustainability of socio-economical and political relationships between the multitude of cultures all over the globe therefore deserves our close attention. This focus calls for macro-level policies and actions. They are, however, important and necessary but not sufficient. Indeed, any macro-level policy on intercultural relationships that wants to be successful, should be underpinned and supported by a variety of micro-level strategies and actions. These micro-level strategies and actions do necessitate a deep understanding of interculturalism at the level of individual actors and their organizations. These relationships between individuals should be embedded in a context of trust and mutual understanding. This is definitely true for all of us who want to stimulate wealth creation through intercultural entrepreneurship and economic development. The creation of Living Stone Cooperation is an innovative attempt to fill the gap between macro-level policy making and micro-level actions in the day-to-day reality of intercultural entrepreneurship.

The combination of interculturalism and entrepreneurship has proved to be a very attractive and challenging one for all the founders involved, not at least for K.U.Leuven. K.U.Leuven indeed has developed a coherent and consistent policy to foster and to stimulate entrepreneurship amongst its faculty. This has led to the creation and the growth of Leuven R&D, the technology transfer office of K.U.Leuven. Since the mid-eighties up to the first quarter of 2007, Leuven R&D has been at the origin of 73 entrepreneurial spin-off companies. These companies are active across a broad range of technical and economic sectors. Their existence and their successful development has fostered the reputation of Leuven R&D as one of the major generators of academic spin-offs in Europe. The creation of Leuven.Inc, in 1999, further illustrates the emphasis of K.U.Leuven on entrepreneurial activity. Leuven.Inc started as a network organization with an ambition to bring together like-minded people driving the genesis and growth of new business activity in the Leuven area. Today Leuven.Inc is thriving, with a population of 600 active members who form the cornerstone of academic entrepreneurship in the region.

At the same time, K.U.Leuven research and education is steeped in a tradition of intercultural understanding and cooperation. Various faculty research groups have been active in this area. Their focus has ranged from social to economical over political issues. They have generated widespread interest and recognition on the basis of their research programs. HIVA, a buoyant research institute at K.U.Leuven, has been active in the field of intercultural policy and development for many years. The institute has attained an internationally visible and renowned position in the world of intercultural cooperation and development, not to the least thanks to the ever-lasting vision and efforts of its director, Professor Patrick Develtere.

As a consequence, it was a novel but also logical step to combine the strengths of HIVA and Leuven R&D into a major new initiative on intercultural entrepreneurship. The opportunity to do so arose when Bob Elsen, an entrepreneur himself as well as an alumnus of K.U.Leuven, introduced a proposal to start both a research-oriented and an application-oriented collaboration on the topic of intercultural entrepreneurship. Being the “founding father” of Joker Toerisme, a successful company that attempts to bridge the cultural distance between people through travel and exploration, as well as the ViaVia travel cafés, he disposes of an ideal network of relationships and a rich portfolio of insights that,

¹ Patrick DEVELTERE, Bob ELSÉN, Ignace POLLET, *Compass for Intercultural Partnerships. A thought provoking book to deploy the integration of cultures as a source of welfare and tolerance in a globalising world.* Introduction by Koenraad DEBACKERE, Leuven University Press, 2007. ISBN 978 90 5867 607 8 - Leuven University Press, www.upl.be - Boekenbank www.boekenbank.be.

coupled to the K.U.Leuven tradition of entrepreneurship practice and research on interculturalism, inevitably should lead to a win-win project. Thus the Living Stone project was born. In order to stress the dual aim of this project, we created both Living Stone Cooperation (LSC), a non-for profit company that will support entrepreneurial projects in various countries all over the globe, and Living Stone Fund (LSF), a research chair at K.U.Leuven that will enlarge and deepen our understanding of intercultural entrepreneurship. By having a non-for-profit organization linked with a research chair, the founders of the Living Stone initiative do hope that they will be able to approach the topic in a novel, much more integrated, way than has been the case before. The combination of LSC and LSF therefore is an innovation in and of itself. It combines theory and application in a highly tangible and practical manner.

This book is the result of the first two years of our joint endeavors. The various topics covered illustrate the path we have followed so far and the fruits we have harvested. Our activity portfolio has grown and can rightly be coined impressive, thanks to the joint efforts of the various shareholders and stakeholders involved in LSC and LSF. Professor Develtere has brought his rich and varied insights on cooperative intercultural activity to the table, as the reader will enjoy to see and read. The experiences developed with Joker and ViaVia have led to the creation of a portfolio of activities “in the field,” ranging from special travel arrangements to dedicated projects over specific local education and training programs. The development of the insightful “coconut model” underpins these experiences. The reader will be charmed by it. Finally, since the start of our operations, we had the pleasure to welcome two new stakeholders: Cera Foundation and KBC Group. Cera Foundation also became a shareholder in LSC. By joining LSC, both partners stress their vivid commitment to the ambitions and aims set by the initial founders of both LSC and LSF. It is a right and just cause. We will sustain it and cherish it with the best of efforts we can spend. Furthermore, the spillovers to a better understanding of interculturalism within Flemish society, will be a nice additional effect all along the path we jointly create and walk.

May “LSC” and “LSF” continue their road to success!

Prof. Dr. Ir. Koenraad Debackere
Chairman Living Stone Cooperation