

1. Foreword

"In our restless day and age every step leading towards a dialogue between Christianity and Islam is of great importance. I am increasingly convinced that one of the major duties of the monotheistic religions is to work together towards achieving understanding and peace. This is the appropriate step in fulfilling our common responsibility to the one God, the Creator of heaven and earth."

Cardinal Franz König, former Archbishop of Vienna 1997

"If humanity, at the threshold of the new century and millennium, devotes all efforts to institutionalize dialogue, replacing hostility and confrontation with discourse and understanding, it would leave an invaluable legacy for the benefit of the future generations".

Seyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1998

"The need for dialogue among civilizations is as old as civilization itself. But today, this need is more acute than ever. Individuals who live in fear and lack of comprehension of other cultures are more likely to resort to acts of hatred, violence and destruction against a perceived "enemy." Those who are exposed to the cultures of others and learn about them through communication across cultural divides are more likely to see diversity as a strength and celebrate it as a gift."

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, 2001



2. Introduction

„We need to remind ourselves, time and again, that neither the historical contingencies and the changing circumstances, nor the differences in color, ethnicity, language, educational background, cultural heritage and religious affiliation among us, mitigate against our common humanity. Our genetic codes clearly indicate that, by and large, we are made of the same stuff.“

The world in the new millennium, however, is characterized by a solidification of separation.
A separation between the poor and the rich
A separation in North and South
A separation in East and West
A separation in power and powerlessness

This separation is to a large extent also a separation between religions and civilizations.
The absurd situation we are living in today is that while wealthy societies are becoming more and more wealthy materialistically, they are at the same time becoming more and more impoverished with respect to values.
Economically poor countries, on the other hand, are becoming more and more impoverished materialistically, but traditional values are increasingly shaping people's lives - religions are once again becoming a decisive normative factor.
On the one side we have a purely capitalistic economy shaping people's lives, and on the other side we have the advance of fundamentalist societies based on religious beliefs.

Furthermore, people in the twentieth century are impacted by the breakneck speed of developments, especially in the fields of communication and mass media. We are faced with developments and don't know what their long-term effects on humans will be.
Information is available anytime and anywhere. This, too, results in breakneck speed. Virtual and actual reality are blurred together and orientation appears to be very difficult.
We get the latest news from all the world's crisis areas, and the pictures and information we are confronted with break our long-established values and transcend the limits of what we can endure.

* Taken from the German version: *Brücken in die Zukunft. Ein Manifest für den Dialog der Kulturen.*
Eine Initiative von Kofi Annan. S. Fischer Verlag 2001.



In this drastic way people are being confronted with civilizations, religions and conflicts that are foreign to them, without having the possibility of directly encountering that which is foreign - and without having the possibility of reflection.

The speed and mass of information leads us to create stereotypes - often connected with fears - which we somehow think will help us cope with these problems.

The lack of comprehensive, authentic information and insufficient relevant knowledge contribute towards polarizing public opinion. People seem to be expected to act, but an appropriate differentiated reaction by an individual is practically impossible.

This situation is creating huge tensions which are jeopardizing the peaceful coexistence between humans beings.

The immigration of people from Islamic, African and Asian cultures to Europe holds an additional potential for conflict, aggravating tensions and fears.

Instead of multicultural encounters, walls are being erected.

There were times when the regions of the world religions and its various different cultures coexisted productively, ultimately paving the way for new technical and philosophical developments. For example, Christian theology benefited from Greek philosophy, Islamic thought was inspired by Persian literature and Chinese intellectual history was enriched by Indian ideas with the arrival of Buddhism in the first century.

Today we are drifting in the opposite direction.

Despite the fact that there are numerous worldwide projects for developmental and economic aid, these undoubtedly important and justified activities ultimately lack the philosophical basis of communication. We no longer recognize that we not only need to give, but that we also need to respect the models and cultures of others.



The West and the developed industrial nations believe they are superior in all respects to the rest of the world, and that they must help all the other nations reach this level.

Therefore, these projects will always only scratch the surface and never achieve a lasting, long-term structural effect.

The act of giving must also include a change in attitude of the giver, just like it is assumed that the receiver will change as a result of that which is being given.

The dynamic element between civilizations is missing.

The dialogue among civilizations is missing.

The mutual experience of cooperation and collaboration through encounter is missing.

The experience of a common interest in worldwide global problems is missing.

An institution as a neutral platform solely committed to this dialogue among civilizations - to help make a globalized world a better place to live - is missing.

The concept that human progress within all societies can only be achieved when there is dialogue is missing.

While the world religions have taken noteworthy steps towards initiating a dialogue, this dialogue must go beyond religious boundaries and must be achieved through intercultural communication.



3. Goals/Aims

of the Bureau for the Dialogue among Civilizations (bdc)

The Bureau for the Dialogue among Civilizations is committed solely to this dialogue. The Bureau for the Dialogue among Civilizations is intended as a cultural institution but will, as a matter of course, routinely combine political and economical aspects and interact with political and economic institutions, without itself engaging in political issues.

Due to our experience, but also, of course, to the global situation, the dialogue must be brought to a new and more intensive level, especially among the Western industrial nations and the nations and regions of the Near East and the Orient, especially those with Islamic cultural traditions, in order to achieve an intercultural communication. The European Union will soon have at its outside borders neighboring countries belonging to the Islamic World - the frequently used term "European Fortress" should now make room for a new term with much more positive connotations. Therefore the dialogue with Africa, South America and the Asian countries will also be part of the goals and tasks of bdc.

The Bureau is not a political, but rather a cultural-humane institution. Education, information and intercommunication are the main tasks of bdc. Economic aspects which are made possible as a result of the dialogue will also be utilized.

The dialogue will be primarily engaged in through cultural activities, within the framework of a cultural exchange.

We especially in the West are experiencing a glut of cultural events. While this event culture is certainly entertaining, it is in its core no longer in touch with the actual essence of artistic activity, which is rooted in mythology, religion and ritual. The result is an emptiness which may lead to a loss of values.

Therefore it is important to engage in the dialogue among civilizations on various intellectual, emotional and artistic levels to achieve the depth that is necessary to truly bring about change. Young people, especially, must be included, for they are our hope for the future.



Symposiums, workshops, seminars, school activities, educational programs, readings, lectures by well-known personalities from various different cultural backgrounds and discussion events, along with cultural representations, will facilitate the dialogue. These events are to take place within the framework of a mutual cultural exchange with the partner countries.

In addition, bdc is aiming towards the following activities in Austria and the partner countries:

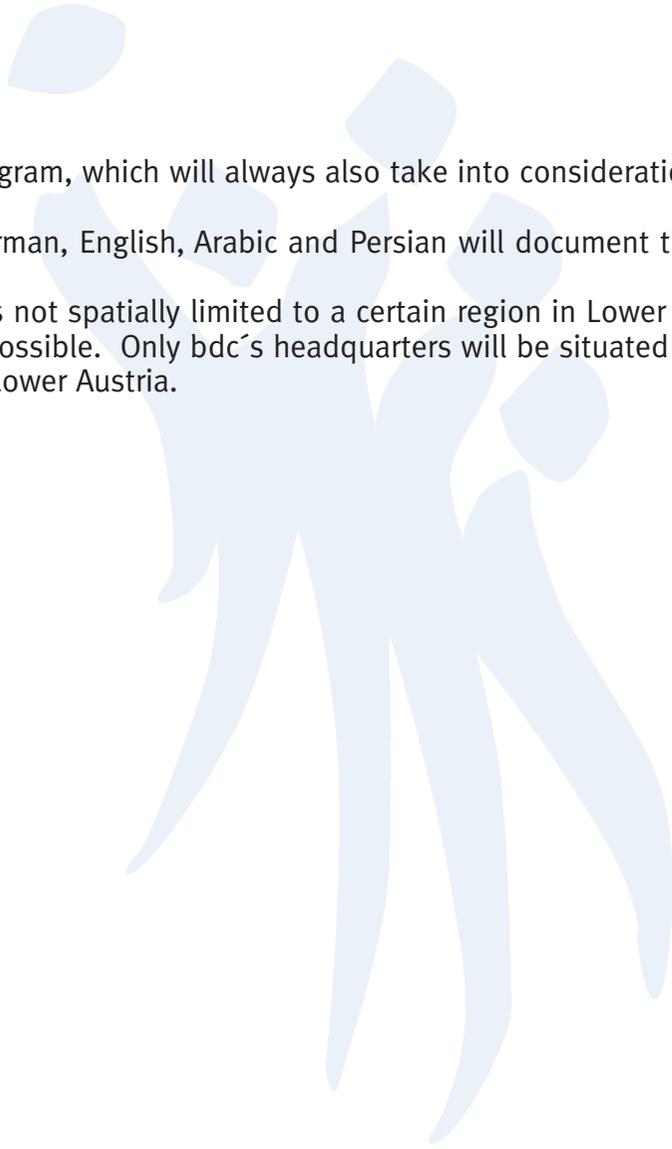
- Teachers seminars
- Tour and workshop programs for students
- Open house for educators
- Resource center
- Issuing publications
- Establishing and running a library
- Setting up an internet catalogue - file

- Student internships
- Learning through dialogue
- Courses, trips, family programs
- Programs for university lecturers
- Special activities

Thus bdc will assume the position of central mediator in the realization of projects in Austria or the other partner countries.

The events can take place in theaters, cultural institutions, festivals, schools, etc.





A semi-annual program, which will always also take into consideration current events, will structure the work of bdc.

A catalogue in German, English, Arabic and Persian will document the activities of bdc.

The work of bdc is not spatially limited to a certain region in Lower Austria, for its work is intended to be as flexible as possible. Only bdc's headquarters will be situated in St.Pölten, the capital of the Austrian province of Lower Austria.



4. Children & women

The work of bdc will, of course, place a major emphasis on the international intercommunication with children, youth, and women, because this is where the future's greatest potential lies.

Our children will inherit more than just our property; they will also inherit the damage or the improvements, whether material or spiritual, that we have caused for the world and mankind. .
As never before in history, we now have the capacity to change the lives of others in time and space, and this idea must be urgently conveyed to young people.

Therefore, this interchange is based on the idea of a direct encounter between children/youth and women of various cultural backgrounds, but also on the idea of presenting productions by children/youth and women in conjunction with related workshops to strengthen the sense of individual and global responsibility. If we are all members of the same unit, then it is quite possible that someday all of us may once again find ourselves either as winners or as losers.
The dynamic of the dialogue not only fortifies our capacity to influence each another, but it can also make us aware of this very fact that we actually do influence one another.

Direct interchange work must, of course, be developed with caution and, especially in the case of children/youth, it is important to pay attention ahead of time to the possible results of the interchange. Ms. Francoise Pinzon-Gil, who is responsible for the UNESCO program Education of Children in Need, has also pointed to this fact.

Prior to such projects, therefore, the goal must be precisely defined to avoid any disappointments. It would be important, in any case, to create situations which allow both sides to experience the encounter as an individually enriching life experience.



The presentation of productions by children/youth and women in conjunction with related workshops is possible within various frameworks and shall primarily be aimed at introducing to as broad a general public as possible the work of various institutions cooperating with children/youth and women and to also win public support for these institutions through the presentation of artistic productions.

This presentation can take the shape of gala events, but it can also be realized as a continuous public presentation with free admission.. The main objective in these cases would be to draw the public's attention very intensely to one project. Thus, the experience with the group of Brazilian children sponsored by EDISCA, who presented their work at the Festspielhaus Spring Ball 2002, demonstrated the incredible power and effectiveness that was engendered within this framework.

Although the information and communication achieved through this kind of work may only be locally effective, it may initiate certain processes which could be useful for further work.

In the sphere children and youth, the themes for symposiums, studies and projects will, depending on the country's situation, include: child labor, unemployment, homelessness, and drug abuse.

In the sphere women, the main emphasis will be placed on: the situation of women, women's rights, intercommunication and information regarding equality of women, and various projects related to these topics.



5. Partners - national/international

Already existing national or international institutions, which were previously not connected, will be included in the work of bdc, and will be joined together.

In Austria the work will include:

- UN
- UNESCO
- OPEC
- EU-institutions
- The cultural-political department of the Foreign Ministry
- Austrian cultural institutes
- Cultural departments of various diplomatic missions
- Cultural departments of the Austrian Federal Provinces
- Individuals engaged on the cultural sector in Austria and in partner countries
- National and international festivals
- Religious representations
- Private institutions and initiatives
- Austrian Iranian Society
- Society for Austrian-Arabian Relations

This cooperation will be striven for both with regards to cultural matters, as well as to the financing of bdc's projects.





The partner countries will cooperate with following institutions:

Cultural ministries

Austrian diplomatic missions

Festivals and individuals engaged on the cultural sector

