One challenge of western democracies today is the integration of their Muslim communities. Trends suggest that due to declining levels of education and rising unemployment the tendency among migrants has been to withdraw from mainstream society. Germany's integration strategy of the past was characterized by top-down policies denying migrants political rights and making access to citizenship difficult. There is now a growing recognition that representatives of migrant communities must be part of local integration policies, and deliberative and representative forums have been created both locally and nationally. This is both a chance for Muslim organizations to communicate their voices and a challenge. Participation through organizational representation does not necessarily equal a legitimate and more efficient integration discourse, as it is not always very clear who is represented this way. (Smith/ Stephenson 2005)

This paper, which is part of my PhD project, uses integration policy discourses in Berlin to explore the hypothesis that formal organizations with access to the policy domain can make a contribution if they fulfill certain conditions. First, they must have a background and relationships with grassroots organizations, labeled as places of “creative chaos” that generate new ideas (Kendall 2003), in this case the recipients of integration policy. Secondly, the meso-level of institutionalized actors must take on the role of the messengers of discourses from the bottom up, assuming that certain institutionalized actors enjoy more legitimacy with their communities than others. Using a qualitative approach, this line of inquiry is challenging structurally dominated frameworks for migrant participation highlighting political opportunity structures (e.g. Koopmans/ Statham 2000), by bringing back an actor-centered dimension focusing on discourse and cooperation between different civil society actors and, on a separate level, with the policy domain.

Questions guiding this paper are reaching out to the levels of interaction between policy-makers and institutionalized actors as well as between organizations situated at the meso and micro-level: How do Muslim organizations get a chance to deliberate on integration policy? How much input can they make? What are the relationships between institutionalized actors and less formalized Muslim grassroots organizations and initiatives? What constitutes differences in terms of representation of and giving voice to grassroots views on integration? There is also the important question what policy makers and third sector organizations can learn from the findings.

For a full picture of the role of the third sector in integration policy, this article reflects on diverging theories of the public sphere and deliberation. One view is that the role of governments should be to re-instate an “artificial” critical public sphere by actively involving citizens and their various organizations (e.g. Gutman 2004). On the other hand it is argued that the democratizing factor inherent to civil society will flourish if only allowed to, referring to the critical public sphere consisting of civil society actors and organizations that are actively providing services or pursuing advocacy functions. (e.g. Edwards 2004).

The latter concept of a public sphere refers to Muslim organizations on different levels of informality and institutionalization and their various relationships with each other. Here I draw from social movement theory and the concept of a movement sector, in which ideologically close movements form the infrastructural basis. Mobilization and action are permanent on a
low level. Formal organizations are part of this infrastructure, a mini-public, which becomes institutionalized itself as it guarantees continuous political input, independent of political opportunity (Rucht et al 1997). This links in with Vivien Schmidt’s (2008) concept of discursive institutionalism, which describes how ideas and discourse can generate change through coordinative discourse within institutions involving entrepreneurs who act as catalysts for change as they communicate ideas of ‘discursive communities’. This approach goes back to Habermas’ elaboration of communication and deliberation in the public sphere (Habermas 1989).

Berlin is home to a large Muslim population of an estimated 200,000 people, some 16% of the overall population. The Berlin integration plan was first developed in 2005, with the involvement of migrant representatives. An integration council serves as a consultative body to sustain input and further development. The Berlin concept highlights participation and the need to include existing networks of organizations throughout. In-depth interviews with Muslim organizations represented on integration councils since 2005 as well as those involved in the drafting process of the integration plan shed light on their positions and views communicated in relation to integration policy formulation. Semi-structured questionnaires with grassroots help elaborating on the permeability of intermediate representation, demonstrating potential differences in terms of legitimacy and successful discourse.

This article will report about first findings from the field and offers a first tentative analysis of lessons to be learned.

Bibliography

- Habermas J. (1989), The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press