

From the Ground Up: Civil Society Driving Transformative Change

by Sophie Reichelt

In an era of deepening polarization, grassroots initiatives are invaluable. By mending trust and nurturing human connection, they play a crucial role in navigating through the storm.

Every year the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs honors such innovative civil society initiatives from Austria and around the world with the Intercultural Achievement Award. It targets projects that demonstrate a strong commitment to intercultural and interreligious dialogue across a wide range of areas, including arts and culture, youth empowerment, human rights, global citizenship education, integration, and gender equality. In other words, the initiative seeks to highlight projects that steer societies through turbulent times with courage, dialogue, and a shared vision for peace.

In October 2024, the winners of the Intercultural Achievement Award were invited to the oiip for a panel discussion titled "From the Ground Up: Civil

Society's Impact on Transformative Change". The projects covered a broad spectrum tackling social division through creativity and dialogue. Projects ranged from the revival of Traditional Craftsmanship in Colombia to the project Culture for Change which aims to improve the relations between Serbian and Kosovar people through art and youth activism. Within the initiative Forced Migration: Interrupted Journeys, New Beginnings, refugees living in Estonia are empowered to share their stories through social media and school visits, while the Polish community garden project Edible Landscape fosters intercultural education bringing together students, senior citizens and people at risk of social exclusion from Poland, Iceland, Norway, Scotland and Lithuania. Austria was represented by two standout programs: More than One Perspective, which connects refugees and migrants with companies to ease labour market integration, and Dialogue of Life, a Lebanese-Austrian collaboration supporting schools in Lebanon

where Christian and Muslim children learn side by side—promoting peaceful coexistence from a young age. At the panel, award recipients offered insights into what inspires their work, the obstacles they navigate within their local realities, and the strategies they've found most effective in fostering meaningful, lasting change.

Among the standout projects was the program entitled Using the Narrative of the Bedouin of the Negev to Change Jewish Israeli Perceptions about Arabs by the Israeli organization Desert Stars. The project aims to challenge deep-seated biases within Israeli society towards Arabs and to foster understanding through personal storytelling and dialogue. Targeting Jewish youth during their gap year between high school and military service, the program consists of a four-part workshop led by two Bedouin and one Jewish facilitator. Participants explore Bedouin perspectives, engage in open conversations about identity, faith, and belonging,



Photos: © Desert Stars

and confront their own assumptions in a safe, intimate space. In addition to improving mutual understanding between young Jewish Israelis and the Bedouin of the Negev, Desert Stars believes that the Bedouin of the Negev can serve as a bridge between Israeli and Palestinian communities. Arab by ethnicity and culture and sharing many social and economic challenges with Palestinians, yet Israeli citizens who often speak both Arabic and Hebrew fluently, Bedouins of the Negev are uniquely equipped to serve as a bridge between the two communities—fostering dialogue, empathy, and a vision for a shared future.

Check our website to discover the winners of the 2025 Intercultural Achievement Award!

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Representatives of innovative civil society initiatives honored with the 2024 Intercultural Achievement Award, presented by the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs.



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