

Training for Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation

Do we give enough attention to ensuring that international youth work is relevant for and supporting the work of youth organisations at local level? In January 2000, 25 youth leaders participated in a training course on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in Strasbourg. Looking back at this course and former experiences in this field of work, Bas Auer, one of the course trainers, raises some important concerns about the meaning and impact of Euro-Mediterranean youth work.

by Bas Auer

Aida is a volunteer in the youth programme of the Egyptian Association for Comprehensive Development. With five other young people she is developing projects aimed at youth in Egypt. The projects are in areas such as peer-education, culture, theatre, environment, and networking. In January 2000, she was one of twenty-five youth leaders who participated in the Training Course on Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation.

This training course - organised by the Council of Europe's North-South Centre and Directorate of Youth and Sport, with support from the European Commission - brought together young representatives from (youth) NGOs of Europe and the Mediterranean. The course enabled participants to further the development of 'Euro-Mediterranean youth projects and networks,' to play a more active role in international youth work, and to promote cooperation and dialogue between young people from both sides of the Mediterranean. An important part of the course was the development of the youth projects which the participants were working on in their own organisations. Through training sessions, peer-support and coaching techniques, the participants acquired and implemented skills in project development, while at the same time they were building their 'Euro-Mediterranean youth project'.

During the training course, Aida worked to build a local peer-education project: training youth volunteers to educate children in a low-income district in Cairo on children's rights through art, theatre, etc. In the last session of the course, Aida and all the other participants presented the projects they worked on to the whole group. The feedback she received on her presentation was noteworthy: one of the participants suggested that her project did not really fit into the framework of Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation, since it was only

local in scope. This participant raised an important question that is sometimes brushed over in international youth work. What do we mean when we talk about international cooperation, or in this case 'Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation?' What are 'Euro-Mediterranean Youth Projects?' Are these terms uniquely reserved for those activities that take place in the international arena, such as international exchanges, seminars, publications, and dialogues? If so, how is this relevant to those organisations in Europe and the Mediterranean area that are doing local youth work? More importantly, how is this relevant to the large majority of young people who do not participate in such events?

Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation

The programmes taking place under the banner of Euro-Mediterranean Youth Cooperation began around ten years ago under the title of the 'Euro-Arab Dialogue of Youth and Students.' Having started as a number of encounters between European political youth organisations and a small number of Arab youth networks, this dialogue was mainly political in nature, focusing on the Israeli-Arab conflict, as well as on other conflict situations in the region, such as the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara.

After this initial phase, the organisations that were behind this initiative decided it was time to broaden the dialogue to include a wider range of youth organisations. With the involvement of the three European youth platforms that existed at the time, as well as three networks of Arab youth and student organisations, two symposia entitled: 'A Euro-Arab Youth Dialogue for Mutual Understanding and Cooperation' were organised in 1994 and 1996, in Malta and Hungary. These symposia allowed a broader range of youth organisations in the two



regions to share their views on issues that young people experience in their daily lives: employment, religious concerns, xenophobia, conflict, education, etc.

In 1996, the participating organisations came to the conclusion that cooperation between youth NGOs in Europe and the Mediterranean region should not, priori, preclude any country or territory and that cooperation should move beyond dialogue. Cooperation that takes place on a sub-regional or bilateral level should be stimulated, South-South or North-South. Co-operation should move beyond an exchange of views to include an exchange of experiences, knowledge, skills and general know-how.

Following the 1996 Symposium in Budapest, a wide range of activities have been undertaken by a number of diverse youth organisations. The Mediterranean Youth Forum has been established with the support of the European Commission and the European Youth Forum. European Voluntary Service projects have been set up in the region; a peace-cruise has taken place in the Eastern Mediterranean; a variety of exchanges have taken place. Most activities have been in the fields of cultural exchange and networking.



Some participants in front of the European Parliament.

The Training course

With the concepts of 1996 in mind, the Directorate of Youth and Sport and the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe took the initiative for the Training Course on Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation. After a number of years of cooperation on a more decentralised level, this TC was to bring a wider variety of youth leaders together who were working on Euro-Mediterranean projects, in order for them to gain understanding of the need of, and the possibilities for, cooperation and dialogue; to obtain skills to develop and implement projects; to live through an intercultural experience and deal with the issues their projects would be faced with; to build networks; and to acquire knowledge and know-how. The training course concentrated on three main strands:

- (1) Project Development;
- (2) Intercultural Learning and
- (3) Networking.

Project development

All participants were selected on the basis of a project which they were working on. The project could be at any stage of development, from an initial idea to a developed project framework. These projects were the starting-point of the project development strand. Throughout the ten days of the training course, participants received concrete training inputs on project planning, management, budgeting, resource mobilisation, monitoring and evaluation, etc. These training inputs were immediately implemented in small project-group sessions. The participants were divided into small groups with similar projects, in which they could further develop their projects on the basis of the training sessions and with the support of their peers and the coaching of the training team. The projects were presented at the end of the course to the entire group.

Intercultural learning

In a series of thematic cafés, participants from both sides of the Mediterranean had the opportunity to grapple with content issues such as religion, human rights, gender or migration and to look deeper into the concepts that underlie Euro-Mediterranean youth work, such as intercultural learning and youth participation. Methods were varied in the different cafés using debates, simulations, games, and small group discussions. Methods were chosen to stimulate an open debate in an atmosphere of trust.

Networking

A series of activities provided the participants with the opportunity to learn about the programmes and activities of other youth organisations. They learned about successful programmes which have been implemented, and they got an opportunity to link up with funding agencies in this field.

Two types of Euro-Mediterranean youth work?

The training course seems to have succeeded in providing participants with tools for developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes in the areas mentioned above, particularly with regard to project development and intercultural learning.

As already mentioned in the introduction, the training course also witnessed an interesting, but sometimes disconcerting phenomenon. There seemed to be a gap between the value of the course for participants engaged in the international/cultural exchange type of projects and the participants involved in projects that are mostly local in nature. Participants engaged in international projects had no problems relating to the training course programme elements, nor to the methodology and resource persons; while participants engaged in local projects seemed to have more problems in finding their place. Besides being an exercise in project development, intercultural learning and networking, the course posed another challenge for these participants: to find out what Euro-Mediterranean cooperation means in the first place and how it relates to them. The answers they came up with were sometimes surprising, such as a comment by Aida a few months after the course: 'I think Euro-Mediterranean cooperation should be about community-based projects, where we



can benefit from an exchange of skills and experiences from other volunteers in other countries. Sometimes I got the feeling that it was merely about youth from Europe going to the Mediterranean, for the sake of the experience of going there.'

Euro-Med cooperation and local youth work

Although such feedback can be a little sobering, it should not come as a complete surprise. We could divide international youth work into three broad areas:

To strengthen local work

Work where international exchange is the means chosen to improve youth work on a local level. Exchange of techniques and experiences that have the specific objective of strengthening youth work at local level.

To encourage intercultural understanding

Work where international exchange is the goal as well as the means. The exchange has the object of fostering knowledge about other cultures and the spirit and values of internationalism.

To build an international movement

Work where international exchange is the means of gathering young people behind a goal or principle that can subsequently be used or advocated in a local setting.

We have then to conclude that international youth work as practised in the Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation programmes in the past decade has been predominantly about the latter two aims. Youth organisations have engaged in numerous cultural exchanges and political dialogues. They have cooperated in an international campaign on Western Sahara; they have worked on a peace-cruise; they have organised voluntary service projects that allowed volunteers from Europe to work in the Mediterranean.

All of this is important work which brings new insights and opportunities to young people. But Euro-Mediterranean youth work seems to have been defined as such: international exchange for the purpose of intercultural understanding or movement building. In Euro-Mediterranean youth work as it is currently defined or practised, strengthening of local work seems to be excluded, or at most to be only a by-product.

A pointed example of this approach is the MEDA Youth Programme of the European Commission, the most important support mechanism of Euro-Mediterranean youth work. The programme has two main instruments to support youth work in the Euro-Mediterranean area: international exchanges and supporting activities, and an extended version of European Voluntary Service. Through study visits, training courses and even some research, the range of support activities for international exchanges is impressive. But NGOs that—on the basis of all of this exchange—come up with concrete plans for longer-term cooperation in a grass roots programme will have to look elsewhere for financial support. European Voluntary Service in the Euro-Mediterranean context does have a big potential for strengthening local community development. The current reality of the programme, however, focuses more on the learning experience of the volunteers than on that of the community project. A volunteer that in the current

MEDA Youth programme is more likely to be from Europe than from the south of the Mediterranean.

A breaking of the connection between grass roots youth work and international youth work is not without cost however. A stronger link between the two in a Euro-Mediterranean context could bring several benefits:

Enhanced perspectives:

Most youth work takes place at local level. Participation in international youth work would significantly enhance the exchange of perspectives, ideas, methods and skills.

Enhanced progress:

Effective links between local programmes in similar areas of work would bring an enriching exchange of methods, skills and viewpoints, and so provide a catalyst for the development of this work.

International and local youth work become mutually reinforcing:

When international youth work is not effectively connected with local work, it can be perceived as a 'black hole' sucking up the energies of people who were once involved in grass roots initiatives—without providing much in return from that same local perspective. An effective link between the two would enhance perspectives and encourage progress, and make clear to local organisations why they are involved in international work, and why they are sending their volunteers, staff and board members to international events.

International exchange based on these principles is far from a revolutionary concept. It is taking place all over the world in a variety of sectors. It needs increased awareness of the variety of youth initiatives that are taking place in cities and villages across Europe and the Mediterranean. It needs an increased understanding of the situations of young people in all of these different areas, and an

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increased understanding of the working conditions of NGOs. It needs, dare I say, more exchange.

An exchange that dares to think small, and does not necessarily aim to bring together thirty people from twenty-five countries. Fifteen people from two villages could be fine as well. But it also needs support mechanisms that go beyond exchange, and which give organisations an actual opportunity to cooperate. After they have gone through an intense and lengthy process of getting to know each other's work, backgrounds and constituencies, they should be able to go to work together.

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The Training Course on Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation was an enriching experience for everybody involved. It showed again how incredibly rich and empowering it can be to work together with your peers from all corners of the world. To find out how different and yet how similar we are, and to find out too how similar our causes are. And it showed again that international youth work is too important to leave to internationalists'alone.

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Participants' Impressions of the Training Course:

'An important element I learned during this course was that really thinking about our own objectives is so important that we do not necessarily have to be constrained by what our organisations normally do, or by the usual funding bodies. Instead we have the capacity to re-examine our project ideas; and if we believe they are fundamental to the objectives of our project, then we have the ability to access resources to look for support for our project, rather than to change its objectives just to conform.'

Michelle Felton, U.K., EVS volunteer in Italy at the time of the training course.

Ahlam El-Alfy of Egypt, writes:

'For a young Egyptian Muslim veiled woman, this training course was a very interesting and unique experience. It was my first time in Europe, and in a community very different from my own, where people had a different perspective on, or approach to some things I considered to be facts of life. My feelings were so contradictory, forming a confusing mixture of fear and curiosity, anxiety and joy, confidence and shyness. Despite my long experience in the development field in my own country, it was difficult for me at first to break the long chain of stereotypes streaming into my head - Europeans are cold, Europeans are distant... There were a lot of questions, based on lack of knowledge and misunderstandings:

When greeting someone, should I approach to kiss the cheek or to shake hands? Why do you wear the veil? Are you forced to do so? Where did you learn to speak French and English? Was it easy for you? Does Islam really accept terrorism? These are the kinds of questions you get when you meet a stranger whom you know nothing about except what you have heard through the media.

The reality in this training course was different. All of us had our own projects that we wanted to develop. We were young people who had nothing in common except being youth workers or volunteers in NGOs. And this was the secret of our success. There was a magic spell within the group, and communication channels were very open. It was strange for us to discover that we had some common traditions and very interesting to become aware of our differences. For us Egyptians it was difficult to imagine life in Finland, with -50°C and six months of day and six months of night. All of us suffered from problems of unemployment, arising from similar or differing causes

depending on our countries. At the end, there were no more individual projects: Each of us exchanged ideas and experiences to enrich one another's projects. Language was no longer a barrier. We all understood and explained our differences in culture and ways of thinking. It was not always easy but with effort it worked; the kind of effort people make who really want to find common ground. It was more important to discover the common ground between us than to explore our differences.

We can meet where there is no European and no Mediterranean, no North and no South. Each of us has many treasures to be proud of. We can meet where we can work together in order to know each other better, for the benefit of our community, and the world.'

The Evaluation Report of the Training Course

on Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation can be obtained from the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg.



Further information about European youth programmes relevant to Euro-Mediterranean youth cooperation:

European Commission, MEDA programme:
<http://www.euromed.net>

European Commission, Youth Programme User's Guide:
<http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/youth.html>

Council of Europe North-South Centre:
<http://www.nscentre.org>

European Youth Forum: User's Guide to the Euro-Mediterranean Youth Action Programme (Nov. 1998):
<http://www.youthforum.org/upto/activity/index.htm>

European Youth Forum, Future Steps for Cooperation in the Mediterranean Region (1997):
<http://www.youthforum.org/spb/beliefs/index.htm>

