



by Jean Philippe Restouiex

# CO-OPERATION

► **... training courses for civil servants responsible for youth affairs and youth association leaders ...**

**Support of youth work, youth policy development is not only the responsibility of public authorities but should be developed in co-operation and in partnership between the different actors involved: youth leaders, youth NGO and civil servants in charge of youth affairs. The training course "50/50" is one possible tool to facilitate the process.**

Since 1998 the Council of Europe's youth sector has been running training courses for both civil servants responsible for youth affairs (at local, regional and national levels) and youth organisation leaders, as part of its programme of assistance activities. These courses on "co-operation and partnership" are also known as "50/50 courses", as they have to comprise an equal number of participants from each of the two target groups.

This article will begin by recapitulating the goals and aims of these seminars and then go on to outline the opportunities and challenges presented by the courses in terms of training, youth policy and social aspects, while at the same time broadening the whole area of investigation.

## ► **Reminder of the courses' goals and objectives**

The following section incorporates the information set out in the course descriptions, together with a definition of the course framework. This will be a reminder for some, while for others it will explain the whys and the wherefores of this type of training course.

"Work in the youth sector and youth policy is obviously not carried out only by the non-governmental youth organisations: the governmental structures - national, regional and local administrations - also have a major role to play(...) The roles of these two sectors, governmental and non-governmental, are distinct and complementary. "

A real - but sometimes only potential - partnership therefore exists. This partnership needs to be developed and reinforced for the mutual benefit and to serve the common aims of the governmental and non-governmental sectors, through constructive co-operation. Experience shows that not only the actors of the non-governmental sector, but also those of the governmental



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sector i.e., civil servants from national, regional or local administrations, need to be trained in order to develop those skills which enable them to carry out this co-operation with the other partner in a smoother, more efficient and truly constructive manner”.

More specifically, not only do the course programmes address the values and principles of youth policy as conceived within the Council of Europe, and the means of promoting co-operation and partnership among NGYOs and the public authorities, but also, and more importantly, the training aspects. The programmes originally involved multilateral courses attended primarily by participants from Central and Eastern Europe, but since 2001 they have been held in such countries as Albania, Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkey, as well as various parts of the Russian Federation.

## ► Educational challenges

The diversity within the target group, whether in terms of experience, age or responsibilities, presents particular challenges which I would like to deal with at this point. First of all, even though specific efforts have always been made to encourage civil servants to take part, we must face the fact that the 50/50 balance has hardly ever been achieved. Several factors might explain this difficulty. Not all the public authorities acknowledge the usefulness of this type of training. On several occasions civil servants taking the courses have had to use their own annual

leave allowance in order to attend. While we realise that it can be difficult for a civil servant to leave his or her office for a whole week, which is the usual argument, the same can apply to students missing their lectures or to association leaders, who must also desert their offices.

Some civil servants may also be nervous about meeting other participants younger than themselves. This age issue can take various forms. We must stress here that this is of course a generalisation, although it is based on a number of actual observations and experiences. The concern may be a projection of the type "I'll be out of place, I'm too old for this kind of thing". Or else it may reflect an apprehension about the working methods used: civil servants often expect formal educational methods, and may be worried about courses using non-formal techniques and participative methods.

During the courses themselves, some methods are seen as being too "childish", too "fun-oriented" because they are not based on formal transmission of knowledge (a person addressing a group in a fairly static situation - lectern/rows of chairs), whereas, in line with the participative objectives of these seminars (promoting participation by young people, but also by all citizens, in the socio-politico-cultural life of every community), these participative methods are aimed at creating a shared experience serving as a potential basis for broader reflection. It would nevertheless be wrong to believe that civil servants are the only ones to hold out against non-formal methods. Some youth organisation lea-



ders also have their reservations about such methods. When this happens, as in any training activity, it is a case of the trainers and participants negotiating the methods to be used, ascertaining what is being done and why, and stressing that these methods are one of a range of possible means of achieving the objectives set. In the "50/50" courses such negotiation is perhaps more complicated because of the diversity of the target groups and of the age and status of participants.

### ► Socio-cultural challenges

Nevertheless, such reservations concerning methods also reflect personal perceptions of each partner's role and status in view, inter alia, of intercultural differences. Civil servants' socio-cultural status and the internal freedom in each administration vary widely from country to country. During the courses this issue usually comes to the fore through a confrontation exercise one of whose key statements is "A civil servant must be loyal to his government". This exercise reveals a wide diversity of opinions on the part of both the association leaders and the civil servants. Some national administrations lack facilities for consultation or discussion between colleagues with respect for hierarchical realities in the various departments. NGYO representatives often have extensive freedom of speech and a better capacity for expressing their analyses and proposals than civil servants, some of whom consider that they must exercise the standard official reserve when acting in this field. Some may see this as a reflection of a different type of preparation (arguing that association leaders are better prepared), but we could equally well claim that the fact of attending these courses on an equal footing, as peers, can be destabilising, in fact just as much for the association leaders as for the civil servants. It is simply a case of accepting that people cannot be reduced solely to their status, age bracket or political function, and realising that the whole endeavour is an intercultural one. This egalitarian message may be hard to discern in certain

societies which are emerging from a past marked by dictatorship or only partial democracy. Paradoxically, Communism, with its great claims about equality, used the State apparatus to create a Nomenclature and assign a major role to various bureaucracies, so opening a chasm between the public authorities and the citizen. The "Co-operation and Partnership" courses often have to cope with this heritage. I quote one civil servant who assessed one of these courses as follows: "I have learnt here that I was not just a civil servant but also a human being".

In connection with this heritage it is an unfortunate fact that in some countries dialogue between youth association leaders and the public authorities is made particularly difficult by the poor image which each side has of the other. NGYOs sometimes get the feeling that they are up against inefficient bureaucracies, obtuse officials with no understanding of youth issues, and this feeling can be reinforced by the corruption which is unfortunately still very much a reality in some societies, not least in the youth sector. Furthermore, civil servants have the impression that they are not recognised as partners and that the NGYOs only approach them for funding, precluding any open, constructive dialogue on the means of improving the response to the realities experienced by young people in the various countries and developing appropriate policy. These mutual perceptions can even be reinforced by international governmental and non-governmental organisations which, in some countries, do little to disguise their reservations about public authorities, which they see as still bearing the stigma of the bureaucratic heritage of the self-proclaimed "people's democracies".

At this stage, faced with all the above-mentioned challenges and difficulties, the reader will perhaps be wondering about the opportunities referred to in the title. This last section will describe these positive points.



## ► Renegotiating the social contract through dialogue

The opportunities described below are not merely a figment of my imagination or a utopian view of realities, but suggestions made by participants in these courses and the types of action subsequently adopted.

The encounter itself is no doubt the main opportunity presented by these courses. More often than not, even though they are engaged in the same endeavour to provide an optimum response to the realities and needs of young people by developing youth policies, governmental and non-governmental operators never actually meet up; they remain strangers to each other. The "50/50" courses enable one side to get to know the other, to accept their different realities and to recognise each other as partners. It really is a case of building up a relationship of mutual trust and respect by jointly analysing the realities faced by young people and formulating youth policy priorities. "I suddenly realised here that civil servants are not my enemies but rather potential partners", said one association representative during an evaluation session. Moreover, the encounters can give civil servants a feeling of being supported in their work: "The course gave me a better understanding of why I want to work in the youth sector. It gave me fresh impetus for my work".

Joint analysis of youth needs and an understanding of the importance of "Co-operation and Partnership" has occasionally led to the post-course establishment of consultation bodies, particularly at the local level, in line with the recommendations of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Municipal and Regional Life. Some civil servants have felt empowered to initiate changes in their departments and their posts with a view to improving the partnership with NGYOs. It would be naïve to think that this can happen without resistance from certain administrative officers who shy away from any challenge to their power or the status quo in NGYO/public authority relations. However, knowing that partnership is possible, and that it can even sometimes lead to joint NGYO/public authority management, is a useful tool for attempting to change things.

Broadening the scope of the discussions, we could stress that the "Co-operation and Partnership" courses really are helping to redefine the social contract in the countries and societies concerned. Although the level is necessarily modest, being confined to one specific social sector (youth and youth policy), these courses are fuelling the debate on how the public authorities can initiate dialogue with civil society, how representative democracy accepts negotiation with participative democracy, and how all the social operators are contributing to the future of each society, to the reinforcement of democracy and to socio-cultural development for the benefit of all citizens.

Above and beyond the educational and socio-cultural challenges, therefore, the "Co-operation and Partnership" courses enable participants to search together for responses to the issues facing not only young people but the whole of the society in question, not only in central and eastern Europe but throughout the whole continent. Of course the search is long, difficult and hazardous, but with mutual respect and the commitment of all people of goodwill responses are nonetheless possible. As Brecht wrote, the night is long but daybreak is coming. Would we be working in the youth field as trainers, association leaders, civil servants, or politicians, with respect for each person's role and responsibilities, if we did not believe that the day will soon dawn? ■

*The opinions and analyses set out in this article represent the author's own ideas only, and in no way reflect the opinions and analyses of the institution for which he works.*

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