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HOW?

A TRAINING COURSE DURING

RAMADAN

How to make allowance for Ramadan without disrupting the course

I still remember the first time I participated in an international training course and more precisely, I remember the fear I had in the first session concerning participants' expectations. I kept on thinking: "Am I going to be able to cope with this large group from all these different backgrounds? Is it possible to communicate with them easily?"

Some of the training courses provided by the SALTO Euro-Med resource centre aim to improve the quality of programme activities by training group leaders in the knowledge, competencies and skills required. This is the obvious aim, but what about the less explicit ones?

"Jump into Euro-Med youth exchanges" is one example of a successful training course. It is quite a special case as it took place from 8 to 16 November 2003 in Bordeaux, France, which is equivalent to 14-22 Ramadan 1424 in the Muslim calendar.

Ramadan is the fasting month for Muslims; the hilal (crescent moon) defines the beginning and the end of the month (29-30 days). Each day in Ramadan is defined according to the sun; it begins with sunrise and finishes with sunset. Muslims are not supposed to eat or drink and they are supposed to give up bad habits or behaviour and replace them with solidarity, tolerance and respect. Ramadan is not only these principles; it is also devotion to God to teach Muslims patience and support for needy people who do not have enough to eat. This training course was unique as it was a live example of the Euro-Med concept: fasting is considered an Islamic or Arab custom typical of the Arab Mediterranean countries.

Although some European participants had heard of Ramadan or seen it practised by Muslims, **this was the first time they experienced a Ramadan day with all its details practised by Muslims.** The training course was also special in terms of its venue, as it took place in Bordeaux, the "capital of wine", in the context of Ramadan, the religious month for Islam during which the consumption of wine - representing the civilisation of the venue - is prohibited.

A training course of this kind shows that although we come from different countries and backgrounds we are able to live and communicate with each other. The context of the training course was one of marked contrast, but this did not affect the group or

the content. Religions are not obstacles to understanding each other or living in harmony; **religious rites became a rich resource for new discussions and opened the door to dialogue between religions** at a certain point in the course. Any observer would have said that the participants had known each other for a long time, not just a few days.

During the training course the participants learnt to accept others, to work in a more co-operative spirit, and sometimes to address differences positively, for example by **showing more empathy and solidarity with others**. They committed themselves to supporting their youth groups and other youth groups by insisting on carrying through the different action projects.

This training course gave the participants a glimpse of the pleasure they will provide to young people, that of the rich, life-long experience of sharing knowledge and information about different cultures. It was these underlying reasons that made the training course during Ramadan so special.

The training course was easy to manage, without being affected by Ramadan, due to consideration of certain issues in the preparation and implementation stages. The team of trainers held a preparatory meeting in July to develop the course aims and objectives, the methodology to be used, and the programme, and to draft a letter for distribution to the participants providing information about Ramadan.

During this meeting the team worked on the following issues:

► **The course programme and the rhythm of the day.**

This refers to the timing of meals and prayers: in Islam there are 5 prayers determined by the sun: **fajr** before sunrise, **dhuhr** at midday, **asr** during the afternoon, **maghrib** at sunset, and **isha** during the night. The timing of the two main meals in Ramadan is also according to the sun (**suhoor**: meal before fajr, iftar: meal after maghrib). The normal training day has three breaks: lunch and two coffee breaks. Since the majority of participants did not fast, it was agreed that the normal timing should be kept to, with certain adjustments to allow for Ramadan meal timing. There was no problem taking suhoor at the ordinary time, but iftar, the main meal and the most important one, could not be served at the usual time as it is very difficult to split one connected session into two parts. On the other hand, the majority could not have their dinner an hour and a half after having lunch, so the following solution was found: participants could have a small snack during the second coffee break in the day and the main meal would be served at dinner time.

In order to define the approximate time for sunrise and sunset in November the mosque of Bordeaux was contacted and that helped in preparing a programme that would not disrupt the group's work.

Concerning prayers, Muslims had the opportunity to pray during the coffee breaks and the meals.

► **Halal food.**

Since the training course was taking place in France, a special organisation run by a Tunisian chef was contracted and the

entire group had halal food and products (**halal means that animals should be killed according to Muslim law**). The coordinators of the training course worked really hard to purchase halal food from special markets according to a list that was prepared during the preparatory meeting on Ramadan meals.

During the course the organisers prepared the sohoor meal the night before, as it is very difficult to ensure that someone is available for serving at three o'clock in the morning! This also was done for the coffee break snack.

► **Defining tasks.**

At the preparatory meeting the following tasks were assigned to specific individuals: acting as discussion leader at the different sessions, purchasing food and supplies, dealing with Internet, communication and transport facilities, and preparing the coffee break snack and the suhoor meal.

The evaluation by the participants indicated that the training course had been very successful because of the commitment shown by both the trainers and the trainees. There are two nice things that should be mentioned in this article: two participants from Italy and Austria tried to fast with the Muslims and, after the iftar meal, the experience gave rise to a very intense and constructive discussion: What did they feel? What did they learn?... Most of the participants took part even if they were not fasting.

One Muslim participant mentioned that he had never fasted before and that this was an experience he would try to carry on in his own country. "***I will never forget these nice meals, I know more now about Arab countries thanks to this training in Europe which has given us the opportunity to get to know each other better***" - this comment was made by a participant from Algeria and it is a good illustration of the diversity between countries forming part of the same civilisation!

To sum up, if you find yourself preparing a training course during Ramadan, it is advisable to get everything ready in advance. The things that need to be taken into consideration are timing, food, the number of Muslims, and a letter to the participants indicating the context of the training course, to prepare those who do not fast for the adjustments and slight modifications to the programme. At the same time this letter will encourage Muslims to participate as it will serve to remind them of the rules of Ramadan. And finally do not forget the WAKE-UP CALL: it is really important, especially for those who have been awake during the night!

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