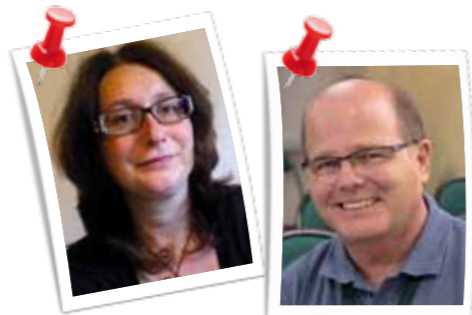




The challenge of volunteering for young people in MEDA countries: steps for a future wave of co-operation

An interview of Bernard Abrignani,

by Federica Demicheli,
demicheli@injep.fr



Volunteering is a key issue in Euro-Mediterranean co-operation and to better understand the social relevance of this phenomenon, we have to consider the events which are currently taking place in the region, and particularly the role of young people involved in peaceful demonstrations. We have to consider the significance of the participation of young women and men who are of different socio-cultural backgrounds and beliefs, but united by their desire for a better future for their country and its people. Youth is the future of Euro-Mediterranean co-operation and mutual understanding is the starting point for the new historical path that these young people have started.

In this context, the social role of volunteering is an important step in the development of active citizens. In general, volunteering is seen as a core aspect of civic participation and democracy, putting values such as solidarity and non-discrimination into action and contributing to the development of societies. Although people of any age can be involved in voluntary activities, there is clearly an important link between the volunteering of and for young people who already have experience of

youth work. Within the context of youth work, volunteering provides valuable opportunities for young people to become active and responsible citizens in their societies through participation, to get informal (spontaneous and individual) and non-formal (more planned and structured) education opportunities, and to be included and integrated into the society. In that sense, volunteering can be seen as 'a means to enhance young people's professional skills and competencies, employability, sense of solidarity and foster active citizenship'.¹ Finally, volunteering and volunteers generate potential benefits for the local community.

SALTO-YOUTH EUROMED has been working on topics such as these for three years in order to develop useful tools to better understand this reality and to be able to contribute actively to this new co-operation. It's therefore important to explore some dimensions of volunteering in the MEDA countries. Bernard Abrignani (co-ordinator of SALTO-YOUTH EUROMED) can help us in this reflection and to better understand the role of volunteering for young people and for the society; so we asked him some questions ...



volunteering



Bernard, how is volunteering perceived in the MEDA countries?

Everywhere in the world, volunteering and voluntary service face social, cultural, economic, legal and political challenges which may create intended or unintended obstacles for young people and youth organisations to pursue volunteering activities. All those factors are not mutually exclusive, since the level of volunteering depends on a combination of factors such as the economic and political situation, the stage of development of the third sector and its image, the culture of volunteering and the labour markets. The perception of voluntary activities in MEDA countries could be very different: some of them, especially the ones linked to 'humanitarian' actions or to religious institutions are welcomed in the local communities, but some others can sometimes be perceived as 'a problem'. I can give as an example the project of an association for women in Essaouira (Morocco). The association received a grant from the Ministry of Social Welfare to develop small dressmaking and baking workshops. These projects have not been welcomed by the local traders, and the fact that they were women did not help! But also, as is the case in Egypt, some families fear that volunteer work will negatively affect the educational process of their children since in many Mediterranean countries the higher education systems are not very flexible in allowing for any interruptions to the education cycle.

Why is volunteering important in the MEDA countries and what challenges are faced by young people?

In many MEDA countries, national social policies are not very developed, and also, in many cases, these policies are not able to provide for all the needs of the society. These 'gaps' are normally filled by the civil society. The NGOs involved in such activities need to be trained, especially the volunteers. There is also a strong link between the economy and volunteering. The economic contribution of volunteering to the national economies in many countries is huge, and estimating such an economic value is an important argument for the benefits of volunteering.² In addition, the provision and sustainability of public or private funding for volunteering and volunteer organisations are also an important aspect of the relationship between the economy and volunteering.

Do you think that international mobility is important for youth, especially those involved in volunteering projects?

The philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) wrote: 'Travels shape the youth.' This sentence is very relevant in our current era of globalisation: to be open minded and to be able to expand one's personal limits are important steps in becoming a citizen of this new world. The possibility to go abroad to volunteer enables young people to better understand themselves and to see their own reality from a different point of view than in their own society. This is a very important step in an intercultural and personal development that is only possible after a long time spent abroad and in contact with a new community.

»» The challenge of volunteering for young people in MEDA countries

What kind of obstacles to volunteering are there?

Sometimes there is a deep misunderstanding about why a young person chooses to dedicate time to others. There are many stereotypes about volunteering as a waste of time or as unimportant to the personal and professional life of a young person. One of the challenges to volunteering is the 'absence of social awareness about the concept and value of (formal) volunteer work. Such an absence carries the risk of little social appreciation for the volunteer and the volunteering activity. In addition, in many Mediterranean countries, military service may pose constraints on young males who would go for international volunteering activities. It is a well-known issue that in many countries, young women face cultural barriers stemming from their families or spouses, regarding international mobility. The legal framework for volunteering is an issue, which can both be an opportunity for, or challenge to volunteering. The volunteering activities and (especially the long-term) volunteers are both directly and indirectly very much affected by a variety of laws such as the labour laws and tax laws.³ If the laws and regulations define, recognise

and promote volunteering, remove legal obstacles and support its practice, 'facilitate mobilisation of citizens', define the rights and responsibilities of the volunteers, and 'devise specific measures', they have the potential to further the development of volunteering in a particular setting.⁴

Of course, the new social and political situation will bring new challenges to youth, but also new possibilities. In the framework of EuroMed Youth IV, each country can add national priorities and most of the countries choose 'active citizenship'. This is a very important sign for the future! This programme is based on solidarity, tolerance and responsibility, which also form the basis of volunteering. Young people will have new possibilities, new programmes and new responsibilities. Active participation is an essential part of this new path in a new society.

For a wider perspective about volunteering in the EuroMed programme, please have a look at 'Volunteering and Voluntary Service in a Euro-Mediterranean Context' (Asuman Göksel) on the SALTO EUROMED website: www.salto-youth.net/rc/euromed/



mobility

1. Council Recommendation of 20 November 2008 on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union EC(2008)3192. European Commission Regulations of the European Parliament and of the Council on European environmental economic accounts, European Commission. Brussels, 9.4.2010. COM(2010)132 final. 2010/0073 (COD). C7-0092/10.
3. Katerina Hadzi-Miceva, 'A Comparative Analysis of the European Legal Systems and Practices Regarding Volunteering', in the *International Journal of Non Profit Law*, 2007, p.40.
4. United Nations Volunteers, 'Drafting and Implementing Volunteerism Laws and Policies', 2010.