

## Preface

For a long time this publication carried the working title of “Mission Impossible”. More than just a cinematographic reference, the title reflected quite literally the feeling of many involved in non-formal education activities in the Euro-Mediterranean framework: that it would be impossible to produce and finalise such a T-kit. This feeling was justified by the objective fact that none of the many deadlines set for its production was ever respected and that practically none of the authors originally commissioned to write the T-kit wrote anything.

We could add a few other signs, such as the fact that the T-kit originated within a Euro-Med Youth Partnership and ended within the (single) Youth Partnership, that the structure of the Euro-Med Youth Programme was radically changed when we were at the editing stage, and that the European Union grew from 15 to 27 member states during the production and editing of this T-kit.

The feared or alleged impossibility of the mission was, however, less based on these facts than on the nature, complexity and potential controversy of the task. To research, write and propose educational methodologies that reflect the realities and issues affecting young people in the 47 member states of the Council of Europe and the 10 Meda countries of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has simply proved to be much more difficult and complex than ever anticipated. In many ways, this reflects perfectly the status of the co-operation between European and Mediterranean countries: multi-faceted, conditioned by many political, social, cultural and economic factors, influenced by history and memory and, very often, extremely volatile. While we all agree that the richness of diversity is what makes Euro-Mediterranean youth work such an exciting adventure, describing, writing about or writing for this diversity is a completely different challenge.

As writers and editors, the authors of the T-kit could not, for example, escape the traps of ethnocentrism and almost automatic forms of stereotyping and generalisation. How can one avoid generalisation when attempting to summarise such a complex political, social and cultural reality in 15 or 20 pages? Conversely, how can one avoid singling out a particular reality that may be applicable or understood only by a handful of people? Does it matter if an experience occurred in a given town with people from one nationality instead of another? What can and cannot be learnt from those experiences?

We originally planned a final chapter to contain the closing statements and question marks for this T-kit, and for this we dreamed up the title “Mutual perceptions, dreamed realities and confiscated dreams” – ‘mutual perceptions’ because everyday reality in Euro-Mediterranean societies is shaped as much by the mutual perceptions people have of themselves and others as it is by reality itself. Perceptions, as we know, are often the result of years of socialising, learning stereotypes and generalisations, and (it comes as no surprise) may contain prejudicial views about other nations, peoples or communities. Producing this T-kit has the obvious risk of helping to crystallise and therefore legitimise many of these perceptions. It is a risk we have to take, in the same way that we know that not all Euro-Mediterranean projects (whether youth-focused or not) actually achieve all their objectives. Yet that is no reason not to try.

We have tried to involve, as much as possible, writers and contributors from the various cultural, religious and national realities of Europe and the Mediterranean. We took this as a pre-condition, but it is impossible to state that we have succeeded. What should be clear to everyone is that this T-kit is not a sociological or anthropological

work, a history textbook or a political essay. It is a practical collection of starting points, references, reflections and questions that may stimulate the reader/user to embrace the Euro-Mediterranean reality in all its complexity and, we hope, recognize where we have got to, now that the T-Kit is in print: it is impossible to describe and explain any reality in a way that is acceptable and makes sense to everyone, but especially the European and Mediterranean reality of this T-Kit. This should not prevent us, however, from trying to be as objective as possible and from acknowledging the diversity of points of view.

In the Euro-Mediterranean context, mutual perceptions co-exist and are deeply influenced by dreamed realities: the “European dream” for many young people in the Maghreb or the Middle East is full of aspects quite as imaginary as the orientalist views of perceived oriental cultures and societies. We know only too well how constructed realities and representations are stronger than any reality-check: the strength of prejudice resides in its ability to blind us.

Dreamed realities were also an obstacle in a different way: must we stick to the stated philosophy and purpose of co-operation, or should we reflect the reality? In other words, is it more appropriate to emphasise the “Euro-Mediterranean” space of co-existence, mutual co-operation and bound destinies or, instead, address everything that today denies it? Is it acceptable to speak about the possibilities offered by Euro-Mediterranean youth programmes without mentioning the fact that many young people from “Mediterranean” countries will never be able to get a visa for most European countries? What does a commitment to human rights mean? The youth worker engaged in Euro-Mediterranean activities will always need a wise mix of reality and dream, without which their work is either too idealistic or simply unbearable. But it is important, in any case, to be aware of how much reality there is in a dream and what in reality is the projection of dreams, hopes and expectations.

The reality of many young people in Europe and around the Mediterranean is a reality of precariousness, increasingly longer periods of transition to autonomy alongside insecurity about their future, which obviously translates and reflects the insecurities of their societies. As youth workers, it is our professional duty and ethical obligation to take young people’s perspectives and concerns into account. This is what participatory approaches are about and also what makes Euro-Mediterranean youth projects a unique experience for many young people: participation, dialogue, creativity and discovery about oneself and others.

None of this happens miraculously or automatically. It requires, from youth workers and project organisers, the awareness, motivation and competence to put young people first and, consequently, adopt a participant-centred approach. Part of the ‘mission possible’ of this T-kit is to provide those involved in youth work and training projects with tools to enable the young people they work with to be fully part of their projects. Like a mosaic, this is more than a collection of practical activities, background information and sometimes uncomfortable questions. It is our expectation that it will all make sense once it is put together, practised and experienced. It will then be a real kit for training and, most of all, for learning.

In this expectation, we hope not only to help some of the dreams of young people to come closer to reality but also to make sure that their dreams are not confiscated by the institutional, political or practical priorities of Euro-Mediterranean co-operation. This is a must we owe to ourselves and to all the young people who, to paraphrase Mahmoud Darwich, suffer from the incurable disease called hope.

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