

Welcome to COYOTE 0

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BETWEEN EUROPE AND MY COMMUNITY

Training courses at European level

A springboard for locally-based European projects...

by Pascal Chaumette

Every European is a citizen...

The recent Treaty of Amsterdam improved the status of individuals within Europe by acknowledging their place in civil society. At the latest informal meeting of heads of government in Austria, there were clear indications of support for the notion that European citizens had been kept on the sidelines for long enough and should now be given a political role within a citizen-orientated Europe. Today, Europe seems to have arrived at the crossroads, as we face the Euro, enlargement to the east, a policy of openness towards the rest of the world and, above all, an increased political role, starting with more intervention by states – for the most part socialist – and a central role for civic and social issues in the challenges posed by European integration.

Jean Monnet, one of the fathers of European integration, was fond of saying that if it had to be started all over again, he would take a cultural rather than an economic approach, adding: "*We are not uniting states, we are uniting people!*" As Edgar Morin asserts, Europe should drop the pretence of mere co-operation between independent nation states and should call on citizens and key local figures to take part. In other words, the European project should not be confined to the limited circle of experts of the Brussels jargon; "*European citizenship results from the active participation of individuals in their shared society*", according to Proudhon, a great supporter of European federalism (even then!). Europeans should now re-appropriate their political role as citizens.[\(1\)](#)

As founder members of a European network, we consider this idea to be essential and one of the basic principles underlying European integration. We need to know what kind of Europe we want, and how to take part in it. How can we make our views count and campaign for more justice, for an end to war in the countries of former Yugoslavia, for greater respect and tolerance towards minorities and for greater involvement of citizens? Central to my approach is the profound impression that everyone has a role to play in Europe, where if we go back 500 years we find that peace was the exception.

Today, whether in Kosovo or Roubaix, suffering is caused by ethnic conflict or social exclusion; suddenly, this vision of Europe seems so distant, and yet so logical.

Youth participation in Europe: a widening gap

Numerous studies have revealed young people's lack of involvement in civil society. Throughout Europe, this phenomenon can be explained by such factors as individualism, consumerism, all forms of exclusion, and the negative image of the state (particularly in some east European countries).⁽²⁾ There are more consumers than agents of change!

Fortunately, youth participation is central to a considerable number of policies at national and European level, because society is constantly changing and participation encourages young people to take responsibility in a way that prepares them for active citizenship and its development. These are the aspirations voiced by associations, which may genuinely encourage European citizenship and promote youth participation, yet may also act as a brake on young people's activities. Owing to factors such as their lack of resources, the precarious nature of their voluntary status and staff contracts, and their lack of recognition by the authorities, these associations are running short on raw materials and, unless they join a federation, can easily be excluded from the European voluntary scene.

One of the aims of the association for which I work in Roubaix is to promote the involvement of young people in civil society by providing them with the means to carry out a project, for example *Ide & Co* in Copenhagen, *Contact* in Chisinau and *Direction Project* in Laed. This objective, which, culturally speaking, is achieved in different ways by each group, becomes much more ambitious when seen in a European context. After all, when we speak of "Europe", we mean more than a continent: we mean a whole project to develop a society, exchanges, co-operation, tolerance and understanding. In attempting to set up a European network of youth associations, we hoped to pool our skills together to boost the impact of our own activities at local level, and to allow their full intellectual implications to be felt at European level.

Organising a transnational project: a skill that can be acquired

The European Commission and the Council of Europe are increasingly trying to interest associations in their youth programmes. Although the idea of working on a European scale may be appealing, you need to equip yourself with the right tools before embarking on such a project. By ensuring that your organisation has the structural capacity to carry out a project at European level, checking that the activities involved will be beneficial in European terms and grasping the essential concepts involved in a transnational approach, you will lay the foundations for success. However, when you are alone in trying to get your own colleagues to support a European project, it is easy to feel abandoned, to lose hope and to entertain the thought that international-scale projects are definitely not your scene!

Association leaders, social workers and active members of civil society do not see the methodology for such a project as an unknown quantity; on the contrary, European association representatives have sometimes carried on where the politicians left off, and generally have plenty of practical experience. However, there remains a sense of fear or apprehension, or quite simply a lack of information, when it comes to organising European youth programmes. The most suitable way of countering this is through training.

By taking part in two training courses run by the Council of Europe's Youth Directorate, we gained an idea of the "essentials" and were thus able to fine-tune the development of our project. Setting up a European network for promoting youth participation by means of international co-operation requires specific skills, among them the ability to cope with cultural diversity.

When you find yourself living for about ten days and for 24 hours a day with people from all over Europe, you cannot fail to be confronted with cultural differences: by this I mean the wealth of different opinions, attitudes, backgrounds and experiences that cannot adequately be conveyed by any book or television report. During the training courses, the practices used by all participants come under scrutiny; this makes them more open-minded, while the concept of intercultural learning, which underlies the whole course content, fosters exchanges and group interaction. The intercultural approach runs through all Council of Europe training courses and can be said to be their cornerstone, since *accepting* others with all their differences is a skill which can be acquired! Nowadays, intercultural learning, with its emphasis on difference and diversity, is essential for all citizens wishing to play their part in European integration; it is an approach promoted by *all* programmes at European level, and should be "practised" just as much in the local community as in the corridors of Brussels!

When I attended a training course for trainers at the European Youth Centre in Budapest, I met my future partners from Moldova and Belarus, who were on the steering committee of the network project I mentioned above. We decided that the setting up of the network should be a collective undertaking, as a mark of respect for the intercultural dimension of the project.

Working together has sometimes been complicated but never difficult, as I feel we pooled together our knowledge during the training courses, where we were able to use the most effective methods of communication. As a result, we now understand one another much better. For example, we needed to establish a set of common definitions, because the meaning of the English terms used in project methodology varied from one culture to the next. During the meeting between 13 youth organisations in Roubaix, I was not surprised at the intensity of discussions, particularly when the network's statutes were being drawn up. We had planned various ways of increasing group interaction through games and "physical contact", which provide an excellent opportunity to let off steam when discussions appear to have reached a standstill, and allow participants to get to know one another better and to arrive at different perceptions of others from those gained through normal verbal contact. In my view, this helped end the deadlock in some situations; all problems which arose were the result of intercultural misunderstandings and mix-ups.

Although the following two examples may appear simplistic, they nevertheless demonstrate that international exchanges need to be suitably equipped to avoid pitfalls, from the preparation to the evaluation stage. Throughout the preparation of the meeting, the steering committee – Aliona, Antonia, Sergei and myself – were mindful of the urgent need to "cope with diversity", as I put it, thanks to our different international experiences and backgrounds.

On a more practical level, the training courses at the European Youth Centre made us more aware of the specific features of transnational co-operation activities, which need to be conducted in a particular way. This applies to the clarity of the agenda, the level of organisation, methods for conducting discussions, logistical arrangements for meetings, ways of resolving conflicts, the transparency of the budget, etc.

Training courses are much more than simply a means of acquiring skills; using active educational methods in a multicultural environment makes it easier to put theory into practice. They also provide an opportunity to exchange views on issues relating to exclusion, human rights, etc.

Courses of this kind are always open to the accusation of dealing with certain issues on a superficial level only.

Of course, it is difficult to look at every aspect of, say, the intercultural approach in 10 days. Nor is it easy to satisfy the expectations of 25 different nationalities; participants have sometimes felt somewhat disappointed by the irrelevance, or limited relevance, of the course content to their own situation. It may sometimes be difficult to put the methods learned during the course into practice, depending on the local context. In my opinion, courses sometimes suffer from their global approach, transcending the specific cultural features of particular areas and leaving no room for participants to make connections with individual situations. However, I also think that it is up to the participants themselves to give further consideration to the issues discussed during the course to ensure that their full implications are taken on board.

Training courses at European level allow participants to become more aware of social issues and to look at them in a new light once they return to their own country. For my part, I have now realised that to make international meetings a success or to work in a multicultural environment, you need a "set of tools" which, when used properly, help people to understand, accept and respect others.

A European network to encourage participation

The aim of the network we have set up is to "*promote the involvement of young people in the development of civil society through international co-operation*" (a phrase which was agreed, after much discussion, by all the members of the network). Thirteen medium-sized, if not small, youth organisations, most of which have never worked at European level before, are convinced that international action is a great way of assisting "local" matters. Finding solutions to common social problems is no longer the prerogative of any one country, but of all countries, each having its own say in the matter.

We chose to set up an informal network. There are no rules governing the operation of such a network; Youth Opportunities Network is therefore unique and is, above all, the result of co-operation. At the meeting in Roubaix, we launched various activities in keeping with our aims for 1999: a website is currently under construction and will provide an excellent resource for all youth organisations and young people wishing to set up a project at local or European level. It will be possible to search for partners in a specific field (for example, an youth exchange project on the environment), to access up to 3 000 project files and to enter into direct contact with a potential partner. For youth projects, we shall be setting up links with business wishing to help fund European-scale projects. The site will also act as our virtual office and will allow people to become familiar with our network.

We consider it important for businesses to take part in our project to help us achieve our objectives. A large-scale information campaign and search for sponsors will be launched, with a view to increasing the involvement of the business sector in civil society.

Within the network itself, a study carried out by two young sociologists will identify the practices used to support youth work.

Finally, the network is organising a training course in September in Santander (Spain), to develop intercultural learning skills and to make the network more efficient.

One of the essential aspects of the project is the "local" impact brought by each member. We are not, after all, working with an imaginary European public, but with young, mostly disadvantaged, young people, who are

wholly unaware of the issues of European integration. By taking part in the network project, each group is able to take the benefits of a transnational partnership of this kind and apply them at regional level. The impact of this on the associations themselves will lead to their own development, because the mini-revolution thus caused may alter the way in which their work is organised or the types of service they offer; their members have been away and now have new responsibilities, and their association is now *part of* a European network. Other consequences concern the association's surroundings, and in particular its partners; the network provides a means of making these partners more aware of Europe and gives the association a new image.

Finally, by enhancing their own practices through training courses and projects of this kind, associations will be able to share their experience with others, thus benefiting the local sphere, i.e. social workers and target population groups. The impact on these groups will be felt indirectly, with services being improved as a result of transnational co-operation; as the title of this article indicates, the effects of an international-scale project are felt first of all at local level, since the new skills acquired through contact with other cultures are assets that can be put to practical use in the field, a fact that some employers have trouble grasping.

The effects of this project can therefore be felt on a variety of levels, including the scale and location of the associations' activities, the everyday services they provide, their practices and their partners. These results will also have long-term consequences, whether expected or unexpected. Such changes will result in the complete internal transformation of associations, making their impact at local level even more considerable. Of course, it is too early to speak of radical change, but the beginnings of a new outlook are already becoming evident, heralding changes that will undoubtedly help associations achieve the goals they have set themselves.

Developing a project in conjunction with others is an extraordinary and exciting adventure. Our network is now another addition to the European scene, and I am eager to hear of any other organisations establishing links to carry out activities in partnership and setting up other networks. Thirteen organisations are members of the Youth Opportunities Network; we have much to learn if we are to work together and achieve our objectives. Some members have already applied to take part in European level training courses.

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FOOTNOTES

(1) See Edgar Morin, *Penser l'Europe*, Folio Actuel, 1990. The other references (Monnet, Proudhon) were noted during speeches and colloquies on European integration.

(2) See *Young people and associations in Europe*, various authors, Council of Europe Publishing.