

# *Euro-African Network:* A Training Course in Cape Town Opens New Paths for Intercultural Learning and Youth Work

*Going beyond Europe and experiencing the challenges of intercultural learning with youth workers from Southern African and Southern European countries – for Davide and Michelangelo this was an exciting idea. An exploration of their contacts with some colleagues from South Africa led them to run a training course together in Cape Town at the end of last year. In their article, they give a vivid impression of how they lived this experience.*



by Davide Tonon and Michelangelo Belletti

Hi everybody! We are Michelangelo Belletti and Davide Tonon, youth trainers, and with the help of a few words, we would like to tell you about an experience that made a big impact on all our senses, let us start at the beginning....

Xena is a cultural association based in Padova, North East of Italy, in which Davide works and with whom Michelangelo and Vedogiovane co-operate. Founded in 1995, Xena has always tried to run youth projects which are open also to the participation of countries that are not members of the European Union (so-called "Third Countries"). In May 2000 Xena decided to present a project proposal to the European Commission, which would be a training course in South Africa - it seemed like a task from "Mission Impossible".

The idea was born when first contact was established at the end of 1996 during a training course on "conflict resolution" in Bonn, where Davide met Toni Sylvester, a youth worker from South Africa involved in community work in Cape Town. This initial contact slowly developed into an idea: how could we find a way in which to work on intercultural learning, dealing with young people coming from really different cultures?

In 1999 we transformed this idea into a concrete project proposal. Needless to say, we were unsure whether the European Commission would be interested in such a project, involving countries that did not even appear on the eligibility list. It was important for us to follow some steps in order to realise this intercultural exchange activity, especially when working with youngsters. So we tested the interest of the European Commission by first submitting a project proposal for a feasibility visit to Cape Town, South Africa for February 2000. This we considered the first phase of the whole process. And it was approved!

The feasibility visit was a great opportunity to initiate a closer examination of two ways - both African and European - of working with young people and intercultural learning issues. It was also an excellent chance to determine the real interest of the people involved, and to prepare the groundwork for the training course which would follow. The path lay open...and youth organisations from Italy, South Africa, Namibia, Portugal, Botswana, Spain and Lesotho were invited to take part in the "Training Course in South Africa for European and African youth workers in the field of the intercultural youth exchanges", which took place in Cape Town from 2 to 12 December 2000.

The participants of this training course were youth workers coming from 7 countries, with as many cultures and languages, belonging to two continents. It was really a black and white mix. They were almost all quite young. The youngest participant was an 18 year-old member/youth worker of a community in a black township in Cape Town. In general, the Africans were more used to community work with homeless children and poor people, to work camps and scout experiences, and also to leadership building. For the Europeans the most common experience was work in a youth association setting up leisure time activities and mobility projects. Immediately this gave us a picture of the different realities of youth work in European and African countries.



But why set up a training course on youth exchanges with youth workers from Southern Africa and Southern Europe as the participants? And why were we thinking about the possibility of a Euro-African youth exchange? We had a general idea, but for the most part we followed our intuition. The course later, as often happens, clarified our motives....

South Africa is a truly special place to run such an activity: a country where there are 11 official languages (people speak easily 3-4 languages), and many more ethnic groups and a historical/political situation that needs a lot of work to further break down the old prejudices and fences. South Africa is a very particular background against which to develop and deepen intercultural issues.

In the training team we combined the expertise of Stan Henkeman and Toni Sylvester, both from Cape Town, on themes like cultural difference and intercultural mediation processes. We brought to the course our Italian experience in group dynamics and "Youth for Europe" youth exchanges. The team was a good mix, and the participants added fireworks with their motivation and enthusiasm following the team's inputs and provoked reflections within the training team. They enriched the course by sharing their own experiences in the field of youth work, for instance of the methodologies and techniques they use. There was real cultural, human and professional exchange among the participants. It was not only continents, countries and cultures interacting, but it was humans open to "drink" all that was possible from this experience.



Photo : Trust-building

Something that Europeans and Africans will certainly take into account after this experience in the Cape for their future youth work in intercultural contexts is that every culture has its rhythms also in communication. At a certain moment it became almost funny that the interventions were so fast that only the European youth workers were speaking...for the Africans it was too difficult to follow and they were not speaking at all. Until the moment when the Europeans realised they were playing alone...The differences between us were so big that living together from morning till night was in itself a daily experiment in intercultural learning.

We experienced the need for better comprehension and co-operation between these two worlds and the importance of understanding more about our own identity and the cultures we belong to. Africans felt closer than ever before with the other Africans and the same happened to the Europeans (even the age-old friendly rivals Barcelona and Madrid were virtually linked during this training!). We can say that this close contact finally gave us the opportunity to begin to understand the famous "European dimension". And it gave us some ideas on how to work out our complex identities.

A high point of the programme was a visit to the black township of Langa, guided by Toni and Tsere, one of the participants. Langa is a famous fuelling fire of the anti-apartheid rebellion. It was like entering a different world, where the unfamiliar music and the smells carried us in waves through different experiences. We walked among groups of kids, the ruins of the apartheid system, murals against Aids, new amazing cultural-art centres. We looked in the distance to the boys in the bush waiting to become men by making the secret ritual of circumcision... and to the white people worried about their "safari". Hear this. A big black woman came out from the garden into the street and looking at us, said: "I was told that today there were some white people to watch!" During the visit to Langa we met also the "sangoma" (witch doctor). From the intercultural point of view it was interesting to know that if a South African is ill he can choose between the doctor and the sangoma, both paid by the health system.

Other highlights were the "national nights". During these parties we tried to mix Botswana-Italy-Lesotho-Spain-South Africa-Portugal-Namibia food, songs, games, traditions and the result was explosive... we learnt by experience that Africans and Europeans have different rhythms and biorhythms.

One marked cultural difference is that our African friends give a different value to their flag and national anthem. It was difficult to explain that for Italians the anthem is an ugly patriotic song, practically meaningless nowadays, when for South Africans the anthem and the colourful flag are the symbols of the newly recognised dignity to millions of human beings.

On Robben Island, where Mandela and many others were in jail, we heard words that we will never forget, as youth trainers and as people who believe in the importance of mutual understanding in order to build a world of peace. "When we got freedom we didn't look for revenge on white people, because we thought that it was impossible to undo one mistake with another", the tourist guide told us who had spent 20 years of his life in that prison.

During the training course we focused on the need and the importance to develop a network of continuous feedback and sharing in the field of intercultural learning between African and European experiences related to our work with young people. We consider that in this way North and South (however you want to define it) can become a lot closer.

The first step of this ongoing process was to bring a new tool to the African youth workers: the youth exchange in the special "Youth for Europe" philosophy (exchange as a process of empowerment). In return, we received from them knowledge and methods of how to work with cultural diversities that were new to us. Underpinning both of these steps was the increased understanding of our differences and similarities and of how to use these to strengthen future partnerships.

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Photo : Group Work Session

### What are we planning for a follow-up of this training experience

We hope to have a Euro-African youth exchange, possibly in Europe this time. This activity would strengthen the contacts among the organisations and the youth workers of the two continents and could put into practice the common foundation and knowledge acquired in the training course in Cape Town. The three European organisations which were involved in the training course (Xena, Rota Jovem and Nexes) are now in talks with their local institutions in Padova, Lisbon and Barcelona with the aim to promote interest in this unique activity and get the necessary funding.

But it will be interesting to see how many other activities and projects it is possible to think about starting from here: European Voluntary Service with third countries, seminars, further developed training courses, and more. Of course even the nicest ideas will not be sufficient without the needed support...

We are convinced that this process has created the possibility of developing a rich network between Africa and Europe in the field of youth work...so we are now preparing in both hemispheres, under different stars, for a new Mission Possible!



Photo : Intercultural learning game «The Island»

