

# How Small Is the World?

## (A Course in Global Interdependence)

*"In a World where we have all grown even more dependent on each other, we must learn to work together, even when we do not always agree". For the author of this article, this conviction indicates the importance of the training course on global interdependence, which is organised yearly by the North South Centre of the Council of Europe. The course gives 30 youth leaders and youth workers from all corners of the world the chance to learn from and about each other, and to try out the challenges - and the magic - of living and working together. Ndung'u Kabilu is one of the trainers on this course.*



by Ndung'u Kabilu



Once every summer, a group of young people gathers at the CEULAJ training centre in the village of Mollina, Spain for seven days. They are days full of fun, games, making friends and learning from each other. The young people are drawn from the four continents of Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa, representing every shade of opinion and background it is possible to have outside the United Nations. This is the training course for youth organisations, which the North South Centre of the Council of Europe has been holding annually for the past six years, the only break coming in 1998. Known in short as the North South Centre Training Course, it brings together an average of 30 youth leaders selected on the basis of their interest in issues of global interdependence and cross-cultural understanding. The trainers of this course are drawn from the same regions as the participants and share a similar interest in global issues and youth work. They also share the view that the best teachers are those willing to teach as well as learn from their students. The course is organised in an interactive manner intended to ensure everybody learns with and from everybody else. Beyond this, the contents of the course have grown and changed greatly over the years, most of these changes coming as a result of the feedback that participants are encouraged to give, and which the organisers take very seriously.

The broad aim of this training course is to expose youth leaders to the concept of global interdependence and their possible role in it. It makes reference to the resolutions of the International Colloquy on 'The Role of Young People in Global Interdependence', which was held in Faro, Portugal, in June 1995. The Faro declaration (as it has since been referred to) made a strong case for the equipping of young people with skills that

will enable them to play a positive role in the process of globalisation and the appreciation of global interdependence. Some of the resolutions made in Faro were again reaffirmed by the Braga Youth Action Plan, which was adopted by the Third World Youth Forum of the United Nations System, held in Braga, Portugal in 1998. These two documents have since formed an important input in the North South Centre Training Course, providing clear justification for the effort taken to organise the course itself.

### Course structure

The course structure falls in two broad sections. The first one is devoted to expert discussions on important issues of global interdependence. This provides all participants with a common understanding of the state of global issues and the role of youth and youth organisations in them. Various experts, usually drawn from the world of the EU political and NGO systems, make short but interactive presentations on such issues like 'Peace and Conflict Resolution', 'The Impact of Globalisation on Development', etc. The second part of the course is then devoted to discussions, projects, plans and activities aimed at responding to such important questions like, 'What is the role of youth and youth organisations in global interdependence?' 'In which concrete ways can young people, together or in groups, play a role in creating a humane though more interlinked world?' In each course the trainers and participants also pose the self-evident question, 'How small is the World?' Despite slight differences of emphasis, the common answer has been that the World is indeed very small and growing ever smaller.

During the training course in November 1999, the

challenge to ensure immediate application of the ideas learned, by developing and later carrying out joint projects contributing to the broad theme of international cooperation was attempted. This had been a suggestion made by participants of previous courses in their feedback. The final impact of these projects is yet to be measured and recorded. However the sheer enthusiasm and creativity that the participants showed for this activity demonstrated that it was the right thing to do. Better preparation will no doubt make this one of the high points of future courses, a way to carry theory from word to deed, to express the goal of interdependence through practical activities. Many people also leave the course with a strong feeling of their own self-worth and capacity to change themselves and the World. This emphasis on the value of individual and group self-appreciation has always been a strong point of emphasis for the trainers of the courses.

### **Including current geopolitical issues**

In each course we include sessions on a current geopolitical issue that has a direct effect on youth and youth organisations. For each of the last three courses, for instance, time has been allocated to activities expressing solidarity with the people of the Western Sahara. This has been done through talks, discussions, special exhibitions and a cultural Sahrawi night aimed at introducing to participants the culture of the Sahrawi people and also to some of the people directly affected by the problems of the Western Sahara. This event has, for three years running, been voted the most successful event of the training course. One that participants have talked about long after it was over. Last year a special event to celebrate East Timorese self-determination and to express support for the people of East Timor was organised alongside the Sahrawi night. Again this was a great success. All these events have later given birth to many successful joint projects for some of the organisations represented.

One of the unspoken risks of organising such events, which are necessarily partisan in nature, has been the fear that they would divide participants, particularly those from opposed political orientations. After all, no one pretends that our youth participants are non-political beings, unaffected by the vagaries of the nationalistic politics, which have paradoxically become a common feature of the World geopolitical landscape despite the onset of globalisation. We remain sensitive to the fact that participants in the course will not always agree on all issues, and it is not a desired requirement that they do so. We learn as much when we disagree as when we agree, perhaps even more so in the former case. It is made very clear that nobody should feel pressured to take part in the special solidarity events if their political or other persuasions do not allow it. To my knowledge nobody has ever walked out of such an activity in protest, even when they expressed strongly held views in opposition to the cause being explored.

It is also understood that, during the whole course, participants have a right to freely express their own views, even contrary ones, provided they grant the same right to everybody else. This has often been the cause of very animated discussions for instance on the Saharawi issue. One time a youth representative from Morocco admitted that a lot of the information he had received from this event had opened his eyes to a reality that was often hidden to the common citizens of his country. At other times irreconcilable opinions are expressed, with different parties strongly emerge from such experiences with a broadened view of the World we live in.

By placing real faces behind such issues as the Rwanda tragedy, the East Timor crisis and others, the participants are better equipped to see World problems first as people struggling to make things better, not merely as news events that affect faceless countries far away. Thus we hope that we help young people see that they have an ultimate responsibility to work with their fellow members of the human race to help meet the many challenges that face us collectively. That the problem of one man is the problem of everyman. It is followed by a deliberate effort to give the young people confidence in themselves and their capacity to change things for the better. These are lessons that are all too often lost in the inexorable march of globalisation. The World is first about people and, no matter where they come from; all people are basically the same and share a common fate. Hopefully by thus generating respect for all of humanity, the participants will then feel challenged to expand this attitude towards all of life and all of the Earth. As a special aid towards this, sessions on such global issues like globalisation and sustainable development have become an integral part of the training. They are meant to show how closely we are all linked to each other, to the social institutions that govern the World and to the Earth's biodiversity. With little exception, course participants have demonstrated a great appreciation of this fragile interdependence between man and nature. While in other forums it may be seen necessary to try and shock people into paying attention to the dangers of unsustainable growth and consumption current in developing countries today, this has rarely proved necessary in the North South Centre Training Courses.

### **The value of such courses**

It is such experiences that have convinced us of the value of holding such a course. Year after year the seven or so trainers and course administrators, fairly young people themselves, drawn from the different continents of the World, volunteer their time, effort and sometimes resources. None of them has ever complained about the hard work or long hours of work that go into the preparation for each course. They all share a common interest and faith in young people and the belief that the key to a better World is through them.

