

# Why Mostaganem?

*Training is a support tool for youth workers and youth leaders to increase the quality and scope of their work. Many training courses lead to new activities which participants organise following the training. Often, this is also a training aim: giving participants the knowledge, motivation and confidence to start a new project with newly found partners.*

*One essential element in particular for running international cooperation activities is getting to know the reality and needs of your partner, his/her organisation and culture. And clearly, a training course is not the only, and not always the best tool to experience a different reality and to get to know how your (potential) partners live and work. Sylvie Floris participated in a study visit to Algeria and is telling Coyote about her impressions from a trip to a country with a dynamic youth scene which few people from Europe visit nowadays.*

## Introduction

The project for a study visit to Mostaganem was the result of a happy meeting of minds.

Nasser Benkhalel, chair of the association **Savoie Jeunesse**, was becoming increasingly interested in EuroMed and, as the local liaison worker for the Youth Programme, wanted to do more than simply provide information, and to organise a meeting of several partners in Algeria. This was a brave, not to say bold, project that came to be carried out as a result of a meeting between Nasser and the chair of the Mostaganem former athletes' association, a longstanding friend with whom he had practised sport in Algeria a few years previously. Their meeting led to their both taking up the challenge of organising a study visit to Mostaganem.

Nasser made it his job to find participants, prepare the file for the European Commission department responsible for EuroMed and seek national sources of co-funding. The Mostaganem former athletes' association took responsibility for the logistics in Algeria and contacts with institutions and associations and, above all, advanced the funds needed to launch the project before it received the EuroMed grant.

This project is a good illustration of a truly ambitious gamble: the political context in Algeria and reactions to the project in Europe were not conducive to visits to Algeria, and yet Nasser Benkhalel was absolutely convinced that something had to be done to put an end to this isolation and to extend a hand to Algerian civil society. He had the courage to take up this challenge and showed tremendous determination to succeed in setting up this valuable cooperation scheme with our Algerian friends in Mostaganem. As a result, the "crazy" project of a "study visit" to Mostaganem actually took place from 11 to 18 March 2001.

## What were the objectives of the study visit to Mostaganem?

The study visit was conducted within the framework of the EuroMed programme set in motion by the European Union and partner Mediterranean countries in 1999 after being launched at the 1995 Barcelona Conference. This partnership was set up to foster dialogue between cultures and encourage youth mobility and initiatives in the Mediterranean region.

One of the criteria for selecting projects is that a minimum of two member countries of the European Union and two non-member Mediterranean countries must set up a multilateral partnership (the number of partners on each side must remain equal if the overall number of countries increases, for example three EU member countries and three Mediterranean countries which are not members of the EU). In preparing the visit, Nasser Benkhalel submitted a single application to all the delegations to the European Commission as he was the project co-ordinator and EuroMed activities are always centralised. He worked in close collaboration with EuroMed's Algerian correspondent, Nouredine Si Bachir, who was present during the study visit to Mostaganem.

The aim of the visit was to set up partnerships between leaders of Algerian associations and European youth workers in the hope of organising concrete youth mobility projects within or outside the EuroMed programme.

Nasser had hoped that eight delegations would take part, but the Belgian partners abandoned the project because of the insecurity in Algeria, and the Moroccan partners were unable to obtain visas. We were then left with participants from the following countries: Algeria, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and Tunisia. In addition to the complex organisational

by Sylvie Floris



arrangements, attention should be drawn to the administrative obstacles (visas) and the problems stemming from the emotion conjured up by a project to visit Algeria. When the delegations met on the first day, before the departure, a number of people expressed fears that had been amplified by articles in the press and embassy Internet sites. The participants felt that they were embarking on a real adventure! Why did we take the risk? In addition to a wide range of individual reasons, we all shared these motives:

- ▶ to see what was really happening for ourselves;
- ▶ to meet members of a civil society about which very little is said;
- ▶ to set up projects in order to encourage youth mobility and encounters between cultures.

The week we spent in Mostaganem exceeded all our expectations and astonished us from a human, emotional and intellectual point of view.

### The highlights of the visit

We discovered an extremely active network of associations.

On the first morning, by the seaside at La Salamandre, the little *El Moudja* (The Wave) theatre plunged us into the world of cultural associations in Algerian civil society. All the ingredients for a surprise were present: a site where poverty and grandeur rubbed shoulders; an exceptional, indeed unique, site with a raised stage on the beach, an interior that opened onto the immensity of the sea through a large window at the back of the stage; timeless, unique places. Young actors who already spoke two or three languages (Arabic, French, Italian or Spanish), guided by an extraordinary director, and all this in the middle of a tiny village “on the edge of the world”. A site of tragedy, too, for one of the young actresses had been burned to death by her brother because she ... was an actress. And in spite of this tragedy, but also because of it, the theatre was even more active than before: it brimmed over with life in droves and the young people of Mostaganem and the surrounding area flocked to it.

We received another surprise at the theatrical evening with the *El Ibara* company. It was founded over thirty years ago and during the most violent periods of aggression and attacks in 1994 and 1995, not once did it cease its work of teaching young people, despite all the security problems raised by this act of resistance.

Our last surprise was given to us by the *El Fen Oua Nachat* youth orchestra. About sixty children, adolescents and young adults treated us to an evening of Arabo-Andalusian music with “nuba” (musicians playing in turn); we were bowled over by their energy and kindness, and carried away by their rhythms and their instruments. All the teachers are volunteers as the pupils’ parents cannot pay them but, as at the theatre, there is no lack of inspiration. Civil society is the breeding ground for social, cultural and intellectual activity.

Seventy per cent of the Algerian population is under 30 years of age; young people are Algeria’s strength as well as a challenge, and the educational, scientific and cultural centres and local community centres that we visited were all examples of how dynamic this civil society is. It shows a surprising amount of energy and determination that outstrips its meagre means. The network of associations has only recently been set up in Algeria and it must become more representative. This is the beginning

of a peaceful struggle and the expression of a passive resistance to extremist pressure on any form of “liberalisation”, be it social, cultural or political.

Adults have not been forgotten in the development of this vast network of associations, and I should particularly like to pay tribute here to women’s associations, as they have to fight on two fronts:

- ▶ the political front, as their actions often contravene the “family code”;
- ▶ the social front, as they encourage women to organise themselves, become acquainted with their rights and participate in activities that contribute to the “emancipation of Algerian women”, such as using computers and sports activities.

They are also Algeria’s memory, as they preserve customs and traditions:

- ▶ the traditional costumes of the various *wilayat* (regions);
- ▶ local cuisine;
- ▶ songs and chants, and so on.

Many Algerian women told us of their difficulty in finding their place in society and their permanent struggle: they are the stable elements and reference points in families and the means by which modernity slowly progresses.



*The group during their stay in Algeria*

We were struck by the way in which the people we met spoke: very freely and with a great need to communicate and show us what Algeria was truly like.

The role of the press was also a source of astonishment because Algerians snap up newspapers as soon as they arrive at the newsstands and devour the local and national news. Thirty national newspapers are currently printed in French and ten or so local papers are published in the Mostaganem area. French is still spoken widely and French-language television apparently has the largest audience; interestingly, Algeria is the country with the highest number of satellite dishes in the Mediterranean. This is a striking contrast with French policy: France, for security reasons, has closed a number of representative and “liaison” bodies in Algeria.

If I had to single out one thing that struck us more than any other in Algeria, I would choose the hospitality we were shown. Wherever we went, our visits always ended with tea, cakes (often made by the women) and music. At a seaside

picnic, we were invited to the home of an elderly person in the village who produced carpets, pancakes and drinks for us (and there were twenty of us!) as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The visits to our Algerian hosts were exceptionally festive occasions. There was:

- couscous with the chairman's family;
- lavish tea at the secretary general's house;
- a party with traditional music on the eve of our departure.

We had every incentive to prolong our stay.

Moreover, we were always aware of the heroism of this civil society, which for ten years has been experiencing a national tragedy and an identity crisis, and, although we were never threatened, the fact that when travelling we were accompanied by a gendarmerie car and two police motorcyclists was a reminder of the sad situation in Algeria. We did not meet any foreigners during our visit, and we were constantly aware of how closed Algeria was and the consequences of its isolation for civil society: the complex arrangements that surrounded every trip, the irksome formalities at the airport, and so on. Algeria is suffocating, not to mention the major problems of urban planning, transport, the environment, etc., it faces.

### What results and long-term consequences can be expected from this study visit?

The participants in this study visit, who came from different countries, cultures and social and occupational backgrounds, very soon created ties with one another, and the hospitality shown us by our Algerian friends contributed greatly to ensuring a close-knit group. Nasser's goal had been to set up four projects, but in fact eight projects were devised and set up during the study visit:

1. The "peace relay" in Mostaganem (Algeria) in June 2001;
2. The Mediterranean games in Hammamet (Tunisia) in August/September 2001;
3. Plans for a meeting of youth leaders in Oporto (Portugal) in October 2001;
4. Culture and young people, in Boumerdes (Algeria) in October/November 2001;
5. A study visit to Tamanrasset (Algeria) to discover the cultures of Southern Algeria from 23 December 2001 to 1 January 2002;
6. A project on life in a modern Mediterranean town, to be set up by the Italian partners in the first quarter of 2002;
- 7./8. Two bilateral Franco-Algerian projects, to take place at the end of 2001, involving drama, music and dance associations in Chambéry (France) and the *El Moudja* and *El Ichara* youth theatres in Mostaganem (Algeria).

Projects 1, 4 and 5 should apply for support under the EuroMed programme.

This was, therefore, a week of intense work, during which meetings sparked off projects that grew more elaborate as use was made of the complementary skills of the various members of the group, and finally led to ... other projects. On our return, the contacts we had made and all the potential for partnerships that had been acquired during our week in Algeria were used in a variety of ways, for example:

- ▶ Our journalist friend Giorgio published a report on the

Internet and is now using it as the basis for a weekly programme in Italy;

- ▶ The association NAF in Calabria organised a lecture followed by discussion on 5 May on the present situation in Algeria, with guest speaker Azzedine Zoghbi, Algerian intellectual and cultural mediator for the town of Orly;
- ▶ Mr Paul Méfano, director of the *Conservatoire National de Région de Versailles* (France), invited the El Fen Oua Nachat youth orchestra to spend a week in Versailles in autumn 2001;
- ▶ the Algerian journalist Sid Ahmed Hadjar, who accompanied the delegation for a few days, has been invited to write for a leading Canadian magazine;
- ▶ the *Institut de Sciences Politiques de Paris* (France) wishes to set up a partnership with the University of Mostaganem (Algeria) with the aim of admitting Algerian students;
- ▶ the *Forum Cinéma* association in Chambéry is making a short film with a resident Algerian director, Abdelkrim Bahloul (director of "*Le thé à la menthe*");
- ▶ the Chambéry Festival of First Novels is to set up a partnership project for young readers, involving Algeria, France, Italy and Tunisia, at the beginning of the next school year;
- ▶ the association *Prestimagic* in Chambéry will work on the story of a famous Algerian musician;
- ▶ the *Théâtre de la louve* in Chambéry will put on a shadow-theatre show based on a tale from The Arabian Nights and invite Algerian musicians and storytellers;
- ▶ *Chambéry Foot 73* and *Aix Football Club* will play a fund-raising match against an Algerian football team;

The snowball effect of this study visit to Algeria is even greater than we had hoped.

### Conclusion

This study visit to Algeria was both a challenge and a test for the EuroMed programme. It was far more successful than its organisers and participants expected. We hope that it will enable other instructors and partner associations to pursue the experiment in Euro-Mediterranean partnership and organise visits to Algeria for young people. This experience will enable us to work with Algerian civil society on a long-term basis in order to get to know one another better, to our mutual benefit.

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### Arab dance performance

