



Directorate-General for Education and Culture

**DIALOGUE BETWEEN PEOPLES AND CULTURES:  
ACTORS IN THE DIALOGUE**

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**Youth promoting a dialogue of  
cultures**

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## Contribution of the European Youth Forum to the European Commission Conference "Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures: Actors in the Dialogue".

*This paper will focus on Youth actors in the Dialogue, with a concrete example of inter-religious dialogue.*

### Youth promoting a dialogue of cultures

In contemporary Europe, political, economical and cultural integration is taking place with unprecedented speed. However, the integration on the local level in many European countries all too often fails. In the winds of change, too many people build fences instead of mills, and prejudices and ignorance steal the agenda at the expense of openness and awareness.

The fact that the question of religion and culture dominates today's political discourse and the fact that our generation is the first to grow up and live in a multicultural, united Europe, give us as young Europeans a great responsibility to engage in and promote intercultural learning and understanding. It is today needed more than ever, and the news are constantly reminding us of it.

## Youth in the dialogue

Youth have generally been interpreted as a 'social problem.' Research and discourse have focused on unemployment, violence, and crime, especially in relation to 'black' or 'immigrant' youth, or in relation to white adolescent racism. However, as many negative social images there are in relation to youth, there is also increasing evidence that youth are living diversity in a way that their parents are only just learning how to do.

Children raised in the 70s, 80s and 90s have been provided with a broad range of cultural images. While negative stereotypes and racism persist, 'black culture' is revered in the media and the arts. Young people have more opportunities at an earlier age to see and interact with others who are visibly 'different'. They are on one hand vulnerable to racist ideologies and discourse, but they are also shown anti-racist alternatives from which to choose from.

Youth are co-creators in society and culture, shaping the environments in which we live, responding to modernity, stimulating contemporary cultural changes, and ultimately inheriting and adapting the social systems that are currently in place. As one expert in the field puts it, "young people are at the crossroads of the process of social reproduction."<sup>1</sup>

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2447 (13 November 1981) acknowledged that "the problems that young people face, after all, are merely reflections of the larger problems of society," and it affirmed the critical roles of institutions and youth in addressing these problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change* (Buckingham, U.K.: Open University Press, 1997), 2.

*"It is important that those who are responsible for making decisions or policies that affect youth begin a dialogue with young people, either through direct meetings or through the structures offered by youth organisations and educational institutions, so that they may become better sensitised to youth perspectives. It should be a primary aim of such dialogue to encourage young people to contribute to decision-making and to take an active part in efforts for the development of their societies. Such a process would also aim at encouraging a view of youth as positive, active and creative participants in society, able to contribute to its multilateral development."<sup>2</sup>*

Educating and supporting youth as change agents of any kind can ultimately inspire a general evolution in the culture at large. Adults, organisations, and institutions can consider youth perspectives and needs when making decisions. If the general youth culture has an intercultural consciousness and demonstrates new competencies to succeed in a diverse world, many other sectors in society will follow. With globalisation at hand, the ability to work in different settings with different people is a necessary skill and an immediate need. By utilising the structures that are interdependent with youth to reach youth, the benefits will bounce right back into the system.

## **Youth Organisations to foster the dialogue...**

Intercultural dialogue is a task to be dealt with on the personal level - not in an abstract way - by meeting, discussing and confronting each others feelings, beliefs and values; learning and exploring and creating commonness. Youth organisations have a wide range of experience in intercultural dialogue, thus gaining insights to intercultural sensitivity. The composition of groups in international meetings works as invaluable resource for learning and in the discussions on the path to deeper awareness and higher level of understanding.

## **...non-formal education as a tool**

Non-formal education has a long history and in many countries it is seen as an important way for people to learn each others' realities and develop to participate in society. Both participation and intercultural learning are key to fostering a dialogue between peoples and cultures.

The *methods* used in non-formal education are very different in nature to traditional pedagogies used in formal education. Rather than learning 'hard knowledge' from text-books, young people 'learn by doing' through peer-education methods and voluntary work for example. Due to the participatory nature of the activities, young people take responsibility for their own learning and engage actively in the process. Youth activities provide 'real life' situations that cannot easily be reproduced in a classroom. Learning takes place in specific contexts and is therefore very meaningful to engage in intercultural dialogues.

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<sup>2</sup>"Resolution 20 of the Resolutions on Youth Rights", in William D. Angel (ed) *The International Law of Youth Rights* (The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, ©1995)

## **Youth activities that take place in international contexts provide the opportunity for intercultural learning**

While formal education tends to be embedded in national contexts, youth events, youth exchanges and seminars and conferences sometimes take place in *international settings*. This provides an invaluable opportunity for intercultural learning. By sharing their ideas with people from different countries, young people develop a sense of belonging to a larger world beyond the national boundaries of their home country. Young people learn language skills, intercultural awareness, intercultural communication, solidarity, respect, tolerance and conflict transformation, while also reflecting upon their own country's culture and values. The content of such exchange programmes also encourages young people to reflect on common values such as human rights, freedoms, peace and equality.

## **YFJ and intercultural dialogue ; “*Youth and the Religious Factor*”**

The relationship between young people, religion and Europe is an area of great importance in relation to cultural dialogue in the Mediterranean. A recent event entitled ‘Muslim Youth in Europe - Enrichment of Society?!’ brought together members of FEMYSO (Federation of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations), youth religious groups of other religions (e.g. Pax Christi), the European Youth Forum and MEPs. The purpose of the event was to highlight and debate the current situation of young Muslims in society across Europe, including looking at the long history of Muslim contribution to European culture.

The outcomes of this event were far greater than FEMYSO had expected and they have opened perspectives for a promising future of mutual cooperation and understanding. The fact that the 30 million Muslims living in Europe are still perceived as foreign or not pertaining to Europe and Europeans starkly underlines the reality faced by Muslim citizens in Europe. However, concrete steps are being done in the direction of mutual recognition, respect and acceptance.

During the event a number of important themes were discussed. Firstly, the issue of human rights was an important cause on a number of levels. As Europeans, the dignity of human rights was one of the core values that united all citizens. The issue also had a wider impact to European Muslims, given the problems faced in Israel/Palestine, as well as the war in Iraq.

Citizenship and young Muslim's roles in society was also talked about. This was a highly political issue. The relationship between the private and public spheres, and that of religion in the public sphere, is certainly one that affects Muslim youth in Europe, as has been seen during the recent political controversy over the banning of the Muslim veil in French schools. In the debate, the status of different religions in Europe was talked about, including the matter of state religions, which was felt to be somewhat discriminatory. However, that is in no way to suggest that co-existence of religions was in any way perceived to be problematic; indeed one of the most fruitful aspects of the debate was that of inter-religious dialogue.

Identity and participation were both themes that were highly relevant to the debate. Regarding the former, there is no schism being between a Muslim and Belgian, between British and Muslim. While Christianity is seen as a European religion, it shares its roots with Islam and Judaism in the Middle East. Regarding the latter issue, participation, young people in general have lost interest in political life. This is a problem for political and social life to function well, and something that affects faith-

based organisations in engaging young people with society. It was felt that how the political establishment perceives faith organisations is an important aspect of this.

Following this Event, the YFJ opened a space for inter-religious dialogue, where faith-based organisations meet regularly to exchange relevant information on coming activities and concrete projects, promoting intercultural and inter-religious learning. The issue of religious identity is one of the core themes discussed by the group, with the aim of understanding better cultural diversity.

*One key experience participants in youth activities take home is first of all a personal one. The European melting pot gives the chance of intercultural exchange but unfortunately is not often used for the best of European civil society. Sharing rooms and lunch tables, thoughts and ideas, smiles and laughter however, bring forth a common vision. - Participants are left with high ambitions towards follow-up, but regardless of what they take upon them in the future, the important fact - the vision - remains: it is possible in the Europe of today to live in peaceful and understanding coexistence when dialogue and awareness replace prejudices and ignorance. The road may be paved with obstacles but as someone once said: every journey of a 1000 miles starts with the first step.*