

## Study Visit, Lome, Togo

### 6 - 26 November 2017

By Chiara Boni

The fifth Study Visit within the “Mission Responsible” project took place in November 2017 in Togo. The three participants were: Bhajamana Mahanta (Jivas Vikas, India), Chiara Boni (Inter Alia, Greece), Sergio Germanà (PRISM, Italy), chaperoned by members of the Togolese partner organisation ACET Togo.

The study visit was structured to comprise: a) an extended field research, conducted through interviews (on a standardized semi-structured questionnaire, utilised in all the previous study visits); b) a job shadowing part; and c) the organisation of a local event to inform about the overall aim and objectives of the Mission Responsible project thus promoting the whole idea of youth work towards the adoption of common standards.

Most of the activities took place in Lomè, the capital of the country, while several day trips were made to nearby villages (Mékoviadé, Attinoufoe, Atti touwui, Badja), where some of ACET Togo’s projects are based and where participants had the chance to meet and interview local youth workers and policy makers.

### Job Shadowing

From the very first day the study visit group was involved in the activities of the Togolese hosting organisation **ACET (Association for Culture, Education and Tourism) Togo** and always accompanied in the research by the president, Agbeko Kossi Kuwoye.

ACET Togo is a no-profit association based in Lomè. Among its aims are the improvement of living conditions of disadvantaged children and youngsters; the promotion of sustainable and environmentally respectful community development; raising awareness toward environmental issues. ACET is active in Lomè and in several villages and communities around the capital; collaborating both with local and international partners. It has hosted many international volunteers - among others, volunteers coming within the frame of the European Voluntary Service - participating in projects, trainings, campaigns about environmental protection, reproductive and general health awareness. ACET proposes to youngsters and children cultural and artistic activities too, such as traditional dance and drum workshops or classes of traditional fabric decoration (*batik*). The idea behind the workshops organised is to provide a chance for personal growth connected to youngsters’ cultural roots and resources to develop useful, concrete and applicable skills.

Twenty are the people involved in the running of ACET Togo, between administrative staff and local volunteers.

During the first week of the visit some demonstration against the president of the country and the corruption of political class took place in Lomè, so it was chosen for safety reasons to involve the participants in activities happening outside the city centre, in a series of villages situated about 50

kilometres from Lomè. In these villages ACET collaborates with **ASSO V.A.E.D.**, an organisation operating in the field of education and development of rural young population. Exchange of cultures and international volunteerism (mainly international cooperation with French universities) are some of the resources used to facilitate solutions to the difficulties experienced by children and youngsters in the area. Together with a member of ASSO V.A.E.D. the participants visited two rural schools and, since it was the beginning of the school year, the visit also served as a way for the two Togolese organisations to distribute supplies to the pupils who could not afford to buy their own, and for the participants to present to the teachers the Mission Responsible project.

**MAREM** (Movement of Action for the Rehabilitation of Marginalised Children - *here translated from French*) is another no profit, apolitical association with a strong cooperation with French partners. MAREM is devoted to the social rehabilitation of street children (orphans or abandoned by their families), who are taken in and offered a place to stay together with educational and cultural activities, a strong community built around them, professionalised trainings, psychological support and counselling, which is rendered necessary in the process of reunification with their relatives. The programme is made to follow the children until their full recovery and gaining of stability, while support is offered also after they leave the MAREM centre. The participants visited the centre, meeting some of the children and joining an evening lesson.

The study visit group was also welcomed in two organisations active in the field of health: **La Jade - Pour la vie** and **RAS Togo**. The ambulatory of La Jade offers to young people counselling and information about sexual, reproduction and psychological health, in a non-judgemental environment. Special educators from the centre also organise awareness campaigns in local schools or at local events. RAS Togo is a Togolese NGO acting as a coordinating body between different advocacy associations supporting people living with HIV and facing daily discrimination. Aim of the two associations is to increase awareness about the condition and to spread information about the way the infection can be prevented.

## Field Research

The three participants from India, Italy and Greece carried out a total of 20 semi-structured interviews. Among the interviewed 10 were youth workers, each from a different organisation (from a number of fields: health; child and youth protection, education and development; culture and arts; community development; international volunteering); 5 were policy makers at different levels (among them traditional community chiefs, the mayor of a village close to Lomè, activists and professors belonging to a governmental committees); 5 were owners of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) who employ young people. All interviews were conducted in French, which is one of the official languages of the country and the language of education, administration and commerce; translation was provided by a member of ACET Togo and at times by Sergio Germanà from PRISM. All the interviews were recorded and transcripts were made to assure precision and accuracy in their analysis and in the elaboration of the following findings.

Youth work translates in Togo with the French expression *travail de jeunesse* and the word for youth worker is *animateur social*, which means literally social animator. This lexical information already gives a first idea about how blurred is the line between youth and social work. Most of the interviewed agreed that what characterized youth work in Togo is the voluntary basis of the activity, with many of the respondents stressing on the importance of not expecting anything out of working with young people if not experience - especially not to make a living out of it. *Travail de jeunesse* is about the process of active inspiration to the young population, giving an example and supporting their future development. This was clearly stated in all the interviews. Also, it is highly related with education, in some cases with literacy, especially for rural children, youngsters, and those who do not have access to free education. Along with schooling, organisations often provide a way to acquire soft skills and to open up to new cultures or new people. In this regards the hosting of international volunteers is considered crucial. Nine out of ten youth workers said that they cooperate with international organisations, mostly based in Europe, or receive training and funding from foreign institutions. Most of them accept interns and volunteers for long periods of time both in the city and in rural areas around.

In some cases youth work is linked with the labour market, as some associations provide trainings, but this link is important for the youth workers themselves, as they acquire useful experience and knowledge working as *animateur social* and as such they are valued as more dynamic and empowered.

There is no univocal path or training to become a youth worker in Togo, or even a social worker. There are academic channels, as university (there is a national school for social education, *Ecole nationale de formation social*) or training provided by different institutions, such as the Embassy of France. During the field research it became clear that most people do not even know about these official channels and consider the daily experience of being involved in an NGO and volunteer with young people as the only actual and necessary training. From this originates the idea that an *animateur social* needs to volunteer for a numbers of year before she/he can really come to manage the situations around and respond properly to people's needs.

Therefore, youth work appears to be rather an occupation chosen by vocation ("you have it in yourself") and youth workers are recruited in accordance with a very specific set of skills: from being dynamic, open minded and aware of the rural situation, up to speaking more than one language, having a higher education and disposing of knowledge about global community and development.

Although in Togo there is a Ministry of Youth (Ministère du Développement à la base, de l'Artisanat, de la Jeunesse et de l'Emploi des Jeunes) the interviewed policy makers did not agree about the existence of policies in the field of youth work and, anyhow, about how much they were implemented and enforced at local level. Several of them stressed that often there are discrepancies between policies coming from the top and the real needs, at social and economic level, of the young population. The role of the NGOs as intermediaries, is in this regard clear: they are often asked by the government or the municipalities to put in action and practically develop activities to comply

with the strategies designed by the ministry; in other cases NGOs and youth workers fill the void left at the level of social intervention by the state.

Opinions about intervention and implementation of youth policies differ mainly due to the different social origin of the interviewed: the local chiefs of communities and the mayor of a small village argued about the importance of returning to a system of communal and local decision making. The smaller communities, and the younger ones within, could discuss and decide on important matters and the voice of the youth could be really heard. This is put in place in some villages, as well as in some middle-level institutions, where councils for youth are organised to promote active youth participation.

Policies implemented by the ministry seem to target for the most part youth unemployment, while in Togo - and this appears to be the case of other West African countries too, as studies show - there is a wide submerged labour market operating by its own rules. And one of these rules is the importance, both for the employers and employees, of informal internships, *stage* in French. Stage can last from several months to years, they professionalise and prepare the young people to start their own businesses once the job is truly learnt. All the SMEs-owner respondents to the questionnaire answered positively in this direction when asked if they employed young people. Youngsters usually look for internships by themselves and ask directly the owner of the business if there is space for them to learn. This widespread informal "practice" is the one giving most young people the opportunity to enter the job market while acquiring skills and getting ready to become independent in the future. Once again, as for the *animateur social*, the stress is on the experience and the learning by doing process, which allows young people to gain the knowledge required.

## Local Event



During the last week of the Study visit, a local event was organised by the ACET Togo team in collaboration with the three participants. The event took place in the local school, école Saint Sébastien, and around 300 people participated - both pupils of the school and local youngsters. The study visit group interacted with them discussing ideas and asking for impressions about youth work. Then they introduced the objectives of the Mission Responsible project and the experiences they brought

from their organisations back in the partner countries.

Local drummers and traditional dancers from ACET Togo animated the event.