



## MEETING REPORT

# Eurodiaconia Youth Consultation

20 - 21 October 2014, in cooperation with BAG EJSA in Germany, Berlin

### Participants:

Heather Roy, Eurodiaconia  
Stephan Burger, Eurodiaconia  
Theresa Schlage, Eurodiaconia  
Hans Steimle, BAGEJSA  
Olli Alanen, Helsinki Deaconess Institute  
Samuele Pigoni, Diaconia Valdese  
Jeanine Brenna, City Mission Oslo  
Hildegunn Hermansen, City Mission Oslo  
Elizabeth Kloster, City Mission Oslo  
Kadriu Fortesa, Diakonie Kosova  
Kateřina Hymonová, Slezka Diakonie  
Klara Makova, Slezka Diakonie

### 20 October

The meeting started with a devotion led by Heather Roy, the Secretary General of Eurodiaconia. Theresa Schlage introduced the meeting agenda and the aims of the meeting. Participants were encouraged to introduce themselves and share expectations for the meeting. Heather Roy then gave a presentation introducing Eurodiaconia, its mission, strategy and areas of work.

Theresa Schlage followed with a presentation on the situation of young people in the EU. The presentation included current statistics as well as experiences from the countries of Eurodiaconia members, which they shared in the framework of a workshop on youth at the Annual General Meeting earlier this year. It also explained Eurodiaconia's approach towards youth inclusion. Youth inclusion should be at the top of the social agenda at EU and MS level to prevent that today's youth become the lost generation of tomorrow. Eurodiaconia believes that youth inclusion is not only about labour market integration and preparing young people to be productive and competitive economic units, but it is about preparing them to be fully active citizens and empowering them to reach their full potential in life. During the discussion participants exchanged which areas they believed to be most important to work on in the youth field. In Norway, the increasing radicalisation of young persons was perceived to be an issue of key importance, deriving from a subjective sense of alienation from broader society. A similar experience of general mistrust and isolation amongst the marginalised youth was also mentioned as an important issue in Finland. Against this background, various participants emphasized the importance of adopting a wide angle in the youth field, promoting general well-being (allowing space for self-expression, stimulating self-esteem and building trust in the future) instead of focusing only on evident problems, and of extending the scope of capacity-building beyond vocational training and employment towards the fostering of team spirit and general social skills.

Hans Steimle, a representative of the German Federal Association of Protestant Youth Social Work (**BAG EJSA**) gave a presentation to introduce the organisation and how youth social work is organised in Germany. The most important document to consult when trying to understand the legislative framework for child and youth services in Germany is the 'Sozialgesetzbuch 8' (Volume 8 of the Social Law Code). To fulfill its social obligation the state gives responsibility to the 6 main welfare organisations in Germany





(Arbeiterwohlfahrt, Deutscher Caritasverband, Deutsches Rotes Kreuz, Diakonisches Werk der EKD, Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband and the Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland). BAG EJSA is a network of service providers that are linked to school services and mobile youth work. They provide vocational training centers, youth housing with social assistance and youth mobility projects. Within the mobile youth work there are 4 four main methods being used: individual and psychological support, street work, community work and advocacy.

In the next session three representatives of Eurodiaconia member organisations shared a best practice example, starting with Olli Alanen from Helsinki Deaconess Institute, who spoke about the project '**Vamos**'. Vamos Youth Services support under 30 years old youths in Helsinki and Espoo towards a meaningful life. Vamos offers holistic support from daily skills to employment, focusing on a marginalised segment within the Finnish youth, which doesn't seem to be able to benefit from the country's extensive network of support services. Every youth gets their personal Vamos worker whose job is to really come to know the young person, who she or he is working with. In addition to providing support on a one-to-one basis, Vamos also offers 'rehabilitative sessions' in a group context. Vamos is deliberately moving away from a 'professional distance approach' and allows workers to really care about the young people and to establish a relationship based on trust.

Elizabeth Kloster from the City Mission Oslo explained that the method of '**forum theatre**' is being used in two volunteering centers for young adults age 18 – 29. Based on Augusto Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed', it constitutes a tool for social change which draws together people whose voices are often overheard, and allows them to develop and present sketches to an audience comprised of individuals who face a similar situations. Through this project young people take responsibility for their peers and support each other. The 'forum theatre' is a creative and interactive way of devising strategies for confronting personal problems, starting from the premise that "the only person you can truly change is yourself." By allowing the youth space to voice their own concerns, instead of imposing discussion topics from above, the concept has radically changed the perceived 'passiveness of the youth' within a single year.

Samuele Pigoni represented the Diaconia Valdese in Italy and introduced participants to the social farming project '**Cascina Sociale**', start-up project for a social farm, aimed to improve both employment opportunities and social inclusion of young people through the practice of multifunctional agriculture. Started in 2012, the project is jointly funded by the Waldensian Church, a large farmer association and local social service providers. In its current form, the project provides a three-month training to 30 young, unemployed social workers. Out of this group, 2 participants are then given the opportunity to work on the social farm and earn a stable income; furthermore, the project aims to enhance the entrepreneurial and social skills of those involved by enabling youth to sell their agricultural produce on local markets. In the future, the project aims (amongst others) to provide space for additional participants and to build closer connections with volunteering organisations.

Hans Steimle then gave an introduction to the work of the **YES Forum**, a European network of 34 NGOs from 18 EU member states working with and for young people with fewer opportunities. Concerning the activities of the Yes Forum Hans Steimle spoke particularly about the IDA project, funded by the ESF and in cooperation with a number of partners from Germany, Italy, Spain, Finland and Sweden. The aim of the project is to allow about 120 young people between the ages of 18 and 25 to go abroad for training purposes. Target groups are disadvantaged young people in transition from school to training.

## 21 October

The aim of the second day was it to carry out a needs assessment and understand how Eurodiaconia members would like to work together on the topic "youth" and how Eurodiaconia could best support them in this area. The day started with a focus group discussion to analyse the state of play and common grounds.

These were the questions asked during the focus group discussion:



- How can Eurodiaconia and other Eurodiaconia members support you in your work with young people?
- Would you say you are satisfied with the current state of play of your work with young people? What is going well?
- What are the things you are dissatisfied with, that you would like to see changed? How could they be improved?
- If you could change something in your organisation that would improve your work with young people, what would it be?
- Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?

Participants agreed that the starting point should always be to find out the real needs of young people. Also, the importance of creating a sense of stability and establishing trust by providing a safe space for self-expression and for one-to-one conversations was emphasized.

Something that works really well in organisations from Norway and the Czech Republic is peer-support, where young people take responsibility for other youngsters in vulnerable situations. For example, Slezka Diakonie supports their users in organising a football tournament once per year for other young members of the community. City Mission Oslo also regularly organises an event called 'Living in Oslo', a learning group allowing young people to share their experiences with and offer guidance to their peers. In Kosovo, peer support was equally mentioned as an important reason for the high participation rate amongst the youth, together with other factors such as the broad range of offered activities (artistic, educational, social) and the effective collaboration between Albanian and Serbian social workers.

What works really well for Diaconia Valdese are organised summer camps for youth – between the months June and September, around 500 children get the opportunity to take part in activities which are overseen by 40 social workers. In addition, there is a youth center open on Fridays that pays attention to and fosters artistic talent of the young people visiting the center. Diaconia Valdese also expressed an interest in organizing more youth exchanges to give more young people the possibility to volunteer or learn abroad. This interest in intercultural exchange is shared by BAGEJSA, which would like to organise more staff exchanges in order to internationalise the organisations and the youth sector as a whole. However, it was equally stressed that international activities should not be seen as a universal priority across the youth sector; in some cases, they might not directly correspond to the real needs of young people. Against this background, the recognition of the youth's heterogeneity and the ability to 'adopt' methods and activities to the varying preferences of youth groups are of key importance.

In terms of challenges, participants from City Mission Oslo mentioned that there are many organisations out there doing the same work and sometimes even competing with each other (both in terms of their target audience and in terms of securing funding), instead of focusing on mutual complementarity. Therefore, it would be useful to improve coordination and cooperation in the youth sector and for organisations to find their niche and most impacting working method.

In Kosovo and the Czech Republic, broader socio-political factors were seen as barriers to youth work. In Kosovo, political tensions and a collectivist culture (which is at risk of undermining young people's ability to take own decisions) were seen as important challenges, whilst the Czech social system sometimes provides negligible financial rewards for finding employment and therefore seems to provide youths with little incentive to change their lives.

Participants also mentioned that, with regards to funding, the administrative cost in relation to youth exchanges are not covered by programmes such as Erasmus+, and that there is no infrastructural support for youth exchanges.

Finally, participants agreed that there is a lack of training opportunities for youth social workers (in Kosovo, for example, social workers often lack structural or formal education), which is one area where Eurodiaconia could support members. Other responses to the question 'How can Eurodiaconia and Eurodiaconia members support you in your work with young people?' were:

- Host groups of social workers/youth



- Host meetings in partner countries
- Promote activities of members
- Support members in looking for project partners
- Support members in sharing youth work methods and best practice
- Exchange of knowledge
- Volunteer placements
- Organise an Erasmus+ Working Group in the future

The group was then asked **what the network could do next** and agreed that a meeting would be organised to exchange best practices, visit a project and to include a training going deeper into methodology of youth work. Eurodiaconia would coordinate the process of applying for Erasmus+ funding in order to finance such an activity. The final goal would be to establish the topic of youth in the Eurodiaconia network.

Towards the end participants shared what **follow up actions** they would take after the meeting. They agreed to take the ideas collected at the meeting back to discuss with colleagues and service users. They see Erasmus+ as a tool, not a goal, in order to fund activities that have a true impact on their daily work.

For more information, questions or comments please contact Theresa Schlage ([Theresa.Schlage@eurodiaconia.org](mailto:Theresa.Schlage@eurodiaconia.org)).