

The challenge of dialogue starts with young people

Report from the workshop of the China-Europe Forum on the involvement of young people in community development

In this short article, I would like to show the importance of dialogue among young people and how it can help to highlight the role of civil society in global relationsⁱ. Cooperation between young Chinese and Europeans can lead to new ways of considering the impact of dialogue across civilisations and social change. One of the key challenges is to attract more young people and provide them with the right tools for personal development in order to make them more independent in the choices they make, more involved in their communities and more responsible citizens in a globalised world.

These were the key themes of the workshop on the involvement of young people in community development which was held from the 19th to 25th July 2009 within the framework of the China-Europe Forum. The workshop was organised by the All-China Youth Federation (ACYF) and the European Youth Forum (YFJ)ⁱⁱ.

From these discussions, it became clear that there are three factors essential to dialogue between civilisations which are a direct result of cooperation among youth organisations:

- identifying common challenges
- cooperation
- the need for non-formal methodology

A Common Challenge

The similarities between European and Chinese societies are sometimes unexpected. In China, the combination of economic growth and a generation of young people, both qualified and confronted by new ways of spending its money, has made the young a key target sector. The most

visible aspect of this change is a rising individualism. In China now, many young people feel disaffected with the traditional structures in which they used to participate, such as political parties; a mindset which became deeply rooted in Europe several decades ago.

It was this consideration which prompted the main questions addressed during the workshop. What is the main role of young people in civic society? How can we attract more young people and involve them in organisations? The fact that these questions are being asked in both Europe and China shows that aspects linked to the development of the respective societies and the interdependence of models remain fundamental.

A desire to attract young people is driving all kinds of organisations to reinvent themselves. Their goal is to better serve the needs of a generation which is more mobile and better connected, but which also faces increasing difficulties linked to a wide-ranging social flexibility (job market, family relations etc.), leading to a lack of stability in daily life.

It is against this background of global uncertainty that civic organisations, in this case youth organisations, offer their members a unique opportunity: to take an active role in changing their communities.

For instance, developing a project which can have a real impact on one's own environment, in conjunction with other civic bodies, has an added value which transcends the immediate results of the project. Learning skills such as organisation, leadership and project-planning in order to

benefit one's own community (whether it be global or local) is a factor which, in the long term, helps to produce responsible citizens who can be a driving force behind harmonious societal change. This issue was of particular interest to the ACYF, who were anxious for organisations of young Europeans to teach them how to organise activities more focused on the involvement of citizens so as to break away from predominantly theoretical discussions of ideology.

Essential Cooperation

Young people's solidarity and commitment really came to the fore in China after the earthquake in Sichuan in 2008, just as in Italy, when another earthquake shook the Abruzzo region in 2009 and where various groups, especially youth associations, joined forces to provide aid. These are clear examples of commitment in the face of events which have a material impact on a local/regional level, but which manage to bring together much larger communities and encourage the voluntary involvement of millions of young people.

Perhaps the hardest things to fully grasp are the additional benefits created by millions of volunteers who may not get a lot of media coverage, but who strive to effect change on a local level. Examples of this include innovative retraining projects in disadvantaged urban areas, facilitating the integration of young handicapped people, volunteering in the political domain and drawing up public policy. In China, the ACYF has been involved in AIDS prevention in cities under the banner of the 'Action Red Ribbon Project'. The association also carries out educational programmes in partnership with peer education for young people from rural areas who work in cities and are especially disadvantaged. Another example of solidarity between developed urban areas and rural areas is the youth action project for a new countryside, which has led to the creation of more than 4,100 centres providing services to improve the quality of life of young people in villages.

The workshop also considered the impact of this kind of work, undertaken by volunteers at a local level, as well as the possibility of collaboration (between China and Europe) and how best to continue dialogue.

In 2011, we will celebrate the European Year on Volunteering, ten years after the International Year of Volunteers, which took place in 2001 under the auspices of the United Nations. In light of this, European and Chinese youth organisations will continue to promote increased cooperation in order to offer greater help to charity workers in their communities and also to make this collaboration more visible.

Extending the Scope

One final element which arose from the results of this workshop and which merits further consideration is how young people communicate, above all in informal or spontaneous contexts which allow them to build invisible but lasting bridges. To illustrate this point, I would like to mention one of the most striking moments (at least to my mind) of the entire Europe-China workshop. It was 4 a.m. and we were travelling on the motorway between Beijing and Jinan, the capital of Shandong Province. We had been due to go by plane, but after four hours' wait at Beijing airport, the organisers had finally decided that it would be better to take the night bus in order to arrive on time for the following day's meetings. On the motorway, the bus passed many lorries carrying all sorts of goods and materials from provinces in the west to the huge factories on the east coast. China was on the move and so were we.

This mini-odyssey provided yet another opportunity for lively debate which, despite the late hour, sparked the enthusiasm of some of the participants. These informal discussions in hushed voices about the economic and social system, universities, political parties and the philosophical concept of democracy are perhaps one of the most lasting results of our talks: although the setting may have been unexpected,

these discussions will surely leave their mark in the future.

ⁱ By young people here, we are referring mainly to the 15-30 age bracket, even though this definition may vary with different organisations or countries.

ⁱⁱ For more information about the ACYF, visit www.acyf.org.cn. For more information about the YFJ, visit www.youthforum.org