

Martin Kaiser and Anne Moellers (Eds.)

Giving the Future a Better Past

Cross-cultural Encounter and Interreligious Dialogue
in Europe and the Middle East

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Martin Kaiser, Anne Moellers (Eds.). -
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Introduction

During a training program which we conducted in summer 2003 as a preceding step for this project, an Egyptian participant summarized his experience on the seminar with the words: "You opened doors of which we did not even know that they existed." He stated this after he had to fulfil the challenging task of designing an interreligious praying room in an international group of Jewish, Christian and Moslem participants. We had assigned this task in a simulation game, which asked the participants to apply the skills they had developed and the experiences they had gained during the program. They had come up with a design and practical rules for the use of this room based on their religious needs, on compromises they were able to accept, and inspired by the vision to create a place for dialogue and shared beliefs.

The Egyptian participant did not specify whether he meant that he had never been asked to cooperate in such an international setting or whether it was new to him to come to an agreement with people from different religions. But independently from what his statement specifically referred to he summarized with his words what we want to achieve: We want to open doors; we want to open views; we want to open the future for new ideas and arrangements. This is why we extended the experience of several seminars – one of them was the program in summer 2003 – to a long-term project, which would also provide the structure for an institutional cooperation of the partner organizations and give us the chance to strengthen the network, which we had started to create.

This book will summarize the experiences of this network. It will give an overview on the design and background of the project, on its goals and on the means through which we want to achieve those goals (chapter 1). It will provide an insight on the methods we used and describe the concrete experience we made when we applied them in the training programs (chapter 2). Some concrete descriptions will give you a chance to participate in the dynamic and sometimes dramatic course of the events. You will feel how challenging the task was for all parties involved, the participants, the national coordinators and the team members. You will read about the experiences of the team members, who facilitated the three training programs and who share with you some of their thoughts and feelings, based on their deep involvement and commitment to the course of the project (chapters 3 and 4). You will learn what kind of impact the project had on the work of each partner organization involved in the project and how the project had a strong multiplying effect on further activities in each country. You will get this through the perspectives of each coordinator and through statements of participants from each country (chapters 5-10).

In general, the book can only touch some aspects that can give you an impression about the complexity of the whole, about the challenges, the doubts,

the achievements and the ongoing tasks. We hope that what we describe might encourage other people to follow the path that we left with the summary of our experience; we hope that people who read this will be strengthened in their belief that dialogue is possible and that small steps can make this world a better place; and we hope that political decision makers come to the conclusion that there are people with serious visions and a strong commitment to work out in their daily lives what they might be striving for in international agreements. We hope to open doors; and we hope to leave a trail by this book for others to go on with similar ideas and projects.

Acknowledgements

We especially thank Mr. Peter John Pollard for the great deal of work, which he put into proof-reading the texts of this book. He took great care to not lose the original meaning and intention of the contributions. Thereby, he sometimes had to compromise between grammar and authenticity and tried to find a balance between both.

Part I:

Overview on the project

Chapter 1

How an idea is put into action: Design and general aims of the project

Martin Kaiser

The first chapter will introduce the design and issues of the project: You will hear about the background, the needs to be met by the project, the general aims. You will learn about its innovative approach, the major activities, the network of partner organizations involved in it and about the political circumstances which built the (international) framework of the project.

1. General background, context and aims of the project

1. Politicians sign treaties, publish declarations and might determine the guidelines of intended changes on the international scene. But they need active citizens and responsible multipliers to fill their visions and intentions with live and day-to-day practice. Exactly in this field, in building a bridge from a large-scale political level to a down-to-earth realizable approach, our project comes into effect. Societies in Europe and the Middle East, though very different in political systems, cultural traditions and economic standards, have to face similar challenges: *They are inhabited by people of different religious, ethnic and cultural origins*. This large variety of origins provides a great potential for both creative development and challenging conflicts. An additional factor of change within societies is the great influx of immigrants, who come from outside the EU as refugees, asylum seekers, illegal immigrants or ordinary guest workers. These are just some reasons for a great dynamic, which will need people who multiply experiences and concepts of dialogue, mutual understanding and integration.
2. During 2004 and especially in the first months of 2005, when this project was designed, the EU member states faced various challenges in the context of international politics: What started as a barely covered dispute in Afghanistan developed into open controversy about the intervention in Iraq. From outside, the *EU was called upon as a mediator and actor in international conflicts* (such as in the Israeli-Palestinian controversy and seen in the road map proposal, and which could create a counter balance to the U.S. as the only remaining super power), at the same time as it had to deal with its own internal developments: *The new member states joined the EU on May 1st, 2004*. With their different historic experiences, young democratic traditions and international links they would have an

impact on the discussion of EU self-understanding of its role in international politics (as seen in the Polish position in the Iraq intervention and occupation). Thus, this was the point at which to include an Eastern European perspective in the analysis of intercultural and political conflicts. In addition, we wanted them as new member states to participate in the process of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and in the training of multipliers who will take international settings into account. This particularly when they develop concepts for intercultural and interreligious dialogue in their societies and between different countries.

3. In many parts of the world – Western Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, the Gulf region, South-East Asia – conflicts seem to be based on a combination of religious, cultural, and political factors. Global developments and the internationalization of political contexts create a lot of interdependencies between those conflicts in various places in the world, the EU and its Mediterranean neighbours. In Germany, for example, the controversial discussion about Muslim groups and their loyalty to Western democracies has been going on for a long time. In many other places the question is raised as to whether religious groups do or don't accept human rights. In former Euro-Med projects, we had already addressed human rights issues, but in the context of this project we dealt with them through the question – which values do we have in common? We looked for the bases that we shared beyond the borders of nations, cultures and religions. *Taking these described interdependencies into account, the concept of this project combined intercultural learning, interreligious dialogue and civic education (for further details s. chapter 3).* This combination of different approaches and fields of dialogue training represent the truly innovative character of this project. Especially, interreligious dialogue is a subject often talked about but rarely implemented in an international setting with European and Mediterranean neighbours from the Middle East.
4. *The well planned and facilitated arrangements of intercultural, international and interreligious settings will be an important factor in stabilizing European societies,* in the European integration process, the implementation of the extension to the East and in EU relations with its neighbours in the Mediterranean area. At the same time both areas, the EU and the Mediterranean countries, seem to be in a key position when referring to interreligious and cross-cultural challenges. The former is an important factor in world politics and a counterbalance to the United States, the latter is an area of great conflict potential with a strong impact on international relations. From the very first conference the official documents of the Barcelona process of EU and Mediterranean States underline the im-