

Key Action: Learning Mobility of Individuals
Action Type: Mobility of young people

Project Title

Divided by Faith, United in Fate

Project Coordinator

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Project Information

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Partners JOVESOLIDES Egypt (EG) , Association Créez le Changement (TN) , Asociación para el Desarrollo Juvenil y Cultural Almenaras (ES) , YES (Young Educational Spirit) (EL) , Mediterranean Forum For Social Development (MA)

Topics Preventing racism and discrimination ; Preventing radicalisation ; Creativity, arts and culture

Project Summary

Objectives

The objective of the implementation of this project was to address the challenges posed by the growing migration phenomenon within the European Union, in particular the significant increase of the Muslim population, which had reached approximately 14.5 million individuals. Projections by the Pew Research Center indicated a further increase of 2 percentage points over the next two decades. At the time, the Muslim community represented the largest migrant population in Europe, accounting for about 6 per cent of the continent's total population. However, this demographic change had not been accompanied by effective integration policies, meaningful intercultural and political dialogue, or adequate employment opportunities, particularly for Muslim migrants. As a result, there was a growing sense of marginalisation within migrant communities, creating favourable conditions for the emergence of Islamic radicalisation and homegrown terrorist acts. Furthermore, Islamophobia, characterised by fear and hostility towards Islam and Muslims, had become a significant threat, not only to Muslim communities already established in Europe, but also to the security and stability of European nations. In particular, Islamophobic terrorist attacks had highlighted how anti-Muslim racism, propagated by extreme right-wing and nationalist groups, posed a real threat to human rights, national security and the European model of harmonious coexistence between different communities. The most recent statistics, reported in the 'European Islamophobia Report 2023', revealed that 52 per cent of respondents in Italy perceived Islamophobia as widespread. This worrying fact translated into concrete consequences, including an increase in violence, animosity, continued marginalisation of Muslim individuals and a missed opportunity for cultural and social enrichment through intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

To address these pressing challenges, the project aimed to develop concrete initiatives that promote understanding and coexistence between young people from different religious backgrounds. The idea had originated during the 'International Dialogue on Migration' youth exchange, with a specific focus on the province of Lecce, which was home to a significant Islamic community of around 5,000 practitioners. This context had inspired the creation of an Erasmus+ youth exchange and sustainable activities involving young people of different religious faiths. The process involved building strong partnerships, identifying training needs, understanding social challenges, defining objectives and innovatively designing methodologies to address the identified issues. The first promoters came from Italy, Greece and Spain, regions that had witnessed strong migration mainly from North Africa. In addition, significant collaboration had been established with Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt - nations relevant in the context of migration and cultural diversity. This strategic alliance aimed to create a project that authentically reflected the challenges and opportunities present in these regions, contributing to intercultural dialogue and social inclusion in the participating countries.

The youth exchange was designed as an incubator of ideas and tools, with the main objective of fostering dialogue, exchange and collaboration between young people of different religious faiths. The end result was the development and enhancement of tools to promote this dialogue not only during the youth exchange but also in the long term within the communities linked to the partner organisations.

The main objectives of the project were:

- To create an intercultural and interreligious space for 42 young people, including 18 with fewer opportunities, from Italy, Morocco, Greece, Tunisia, Egypt and Spain, to discuss and confront the value of cultural and religious diversity, freedom, tolerance and respect for rights;
- Reinforce the key competences of the young participants, who were the protagonists of the activities;

- Reduce Islamophobic sentiments and prevent phenomena of hatred and violence in the communities involved;
- Promote opportunities to participate in Erasmus+ and ESC projects, increasing the sense of Europeanism among the young people involved.

Implementation

The youth exchange 'Divided by Faith, United in Fate' took place at the Hostel Salento in Alezio, Lecce, from 4 to 10 May 2024. This ambitious initiative involved a total of 42 participants from six different countries: Italy, Morocco, Greece, Tunisia, Spain and Egypt. The selection of participants was meticulously designed to ensure a diverse and inclusive composition, promoting intercultural experiences and interactions. The 6 group leaders had an impressive track record in managing and leading youth projects, demonstrating their ability to effectively guide and support participants. Their experience in coordinating numerous initiatives was a testimony to their competence.

Among the remaining 36 participants, 10 identified themselves as Muslims and had experienced discrimination related to their religion, and 8 young people had dropped out of secondary school early, highlighting the project's commitment to providing opportunities for those facing disadvantages. The remaining participants in each group included 5 young volunteers from the partner associations, 8 young people classified as NEET and 5 students from various school levels. The participants included 21 girls and 21 boys.

The youth exchange was a dynamic learning platform, strongly based on non-formal learning methods, with an emphasis on an experiential and interactive approach to education. These methods included a wide range of activities, including workshops, discussions, artistic activities, storytelling, games and simulations. These diverse techniques were designed to stimulate active participation, critical thinking and the development of practical skills among participants.

At the heart of the youth exchange was the aim to promote intercultural understanding by actively engaging participants from different cultural backgrounds in meaningful interactions and dialogues. Rather than simply exposing participants to different cultures, sessions were carefully designed to encourage them to move beyond stereotypes and preconceptions. The goal was to cultivate a deep appreciation for the richness of each culture, rooted in an authentic understanding of the lived experiences of individuals from different parts of the world. This transformative process equipped participants with empathy, open-mindedness and the ability to perceive the world from multiple perspectives, enabling them to move through our interconnected global community with sensitivity and respect for diversity.

Numerous sessions provided space to explore complex social issues. Through these interactive activities, participants were pushed to critically analyse social challenges, including discrimination, exclusion and intolerance. The youth exchange aimed to empower participants to become active and aware citizens, providing them with the skills and knowledge to contribute positively to their communities. They learnt to identify and address social issues, to participate in democratic processes and to be advocates for positive change. By the end of the youth exchange, participants had honed their skills to collaborate, empathise and work towards building a more just and inclusive society.

The culminating event of the youth exchange, the 'Love your neighbour' event, provided a platform for meaningful conversations and interactions between participants from different religious faiths. Held at Hostel Salento, this event extended an open invitation to the local community, encouraging local people to attend and interact with participants. This community involvement broadened the scope of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, extending the impact of the youth exchange beyond the immediate group of participants.

Achievements

Participants actively took part in structured dialogues and activities that promoted understanding of different cultures and religious practices. This fostered greater empathy and open-mindedness, giving them the tools to relate to people from different backgrounds and to navigate multicultural contexts. The project's emphasis on

teamwork, communication and problem solving stimulated profound personal growth. Participants developed effective communication skills, critical thinking skills and collaborative competences, relevant in academic, professional and personal contexts.

Involvement in the European Commission's Erasmus+ programme strengthened participants' sense of European identity. They recognised themselves as active players in promoting European values and principles and were encouraged to participate in European initiatives and to support unity and solidarity. The project's immersive environment significantly improved language skills, particularly in English, increasing confidence in international communication and fostering employability. The project's environmental approach also deepened awareness of ecological issues, stimulating more conscious choices and a commitment to sustainability.

The participants built a wide network of contacts, including peers from different backgrounds, experts and partner organisations. These networks proved invaluable for personal and professional growth, providing support, mentoring and opportunities for collaboration. By addressing issues such as Islamophobia and discrimination, participants developed a greater understanding of social injustice and the importance of civic engagement and advocacy for a more inclusive society. The emphasis on creating sustainable tools and resources ensured a lasting impact, as these tools were reused and shared, fostering ongoing intercultural dialogue. The project also fostered a passion for lifelong learning in young people, strengthening their ability to adapt to future challenges and developing resilience and flexibility.

Participating organisations strengthened their capacity to address issues related to Islamophobia, discrimination and intercultural understanding, enriching their skills and positioning themselves as credible actors in promoting social cohesion. They benefited from the tools and resources created in the project, useful for future initiatives, workshops and educational programmes. Collaboration with partners from different countries and regions expanded international networks, facilitating joint planning and participation in new calls and initiatives.

Organisations gained greater visibility and credibility for their commitment to promoting diversity, tolerance and human rights, opening doors to new funding, partnerships and opportunities. Staff acquired new skills in project management, intercultural dialogue and youth work, improving their effectiveness in implementing future activities. The commitment to addressing social issues has inspired organisations to remain active as agents of change in their communities, contributing to social justice, equality and the promotion of human rights. The tools, resources and networks built during the project continue to strengthen the organisations' work, ensuring a long-term impact. The organisations have remained involved in working with young people, promoting initiatives that make them active citizens and leaders in their communities, thus contributing to stronger and more resilient societies.

At the local level, the project promoted cultural understanding, tolerance and community cohesion, fostering inclusion and harmonious relationships between residents. At the regional level, it has encouraged intercultural dialogue and understanding in the Mediterranean region, contributing to the reduction of tensions and the promotion of more stable cooperation. At the national level, the project proved to be an effective model of inclusive youth exchange on sensitive issues, contributing to national efforts to combat discrimination and promote social inclusion. The project was fully in line with Erasmus+ and EU priorities, supporting European identity, active citizenship and international cooperation in addressing global challenges. Collaboration with stakeholders at local, regional and national level brought valuable expertise and resources, ensuring contextually relevant activities.

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