

The art of dialogue by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

At the 11th edition of the World Forum for Democracy, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe sponsored Lab 7 on “Cross-cultural understanding: how well do we know our neighbours?” The debate focused on three projects aimed at reconciling groups and communities divided by traumatic and conflictual memories. Through art and creativity, with a special focus on young people, these projects succeed in generating dialogue that transcends and heals antagonisms between ethnic groups, religious communities and minorities, as well as between different generations and social classes.

“Thinking about the relationship between peace and democracy is the issue that provided the inspiration for this Lab,” was the introductory remark made by Véronique Bertholle (France, SOC/G/PD), Congress Deputy Thematic Spokesperson on Youth and Deputy Mayor of Strasbourg. While stressing the commitment of the Congress to improving intercultural dialogue, in particular through its 12 principles for interfaith dialogue at local level and its policy for including young people and minorities in local political life, etc., she said that the Lab came at just the right time against the background of tragic international developments.

The devastating impact which war has on peace and good neighbourliness between communities was the starting point of the three projects put forward in Lab 7. Presented by Prakash Bhattarai, Executive Director of the Centre for Social Change (CSC), a non-profit research and advocacy institute in Nepal, the project called Sadbhaav, which means “harmony” in the local language, seeks to overcome the stigmas of the war that disrupted the relationships between the various ethnic groups and religious communities in Nepal from 1996 to 2006.

The People Dialogue Festival of the Centre for Multiparty Democracy in Kenya also seeks to pacify relations between the 49 ethnic groups living in the country, whose inhabitants “still bear the scars of the colonial past” and “are afraid to speak up or take part in politics”. Lastly, the aim of the House of Good Tones project in Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina is to make the city known not for the genocide that occurred in the 1990s but for a peace and reconciliation project that provides inspiration and secures recognition for the Better Side of Srebrenica.

How can these goals be achieved? The three projects use art (painting, dance and music) to break the ice and create spontaneous and lively dialogue. In Nepal, the advocacy and research institute draws both on the artistic process involving young people aged 14 to 16, artists, researchers and facilitators and also on the resulting artistic products. Along with “dialogue manuals”, those products are used to initiate dialogue with young people on complex issues concerning their cultural, religious or political differences. With 80 high schools and 80 000 young people involved, the project is continuing to improve and build on past experience.

“Art and music, in particular, enable us to connect directly with our hearts, overcoming ideological and political barriers,” said Ismar Poric, Director of the House of Good Tones in Srebrenica. The choir formed as part of the project takes the children on journeys all over Europe, opening their eyes to the hope of a better future.

“Thousands of people have also come from abroad to work with us in Srebrenica,” said Mr Poric, in whose view only “a contagion of good energy can create a sense of belonging that goes beyond distinctive identities.”

Enthusiasm and passion are also central to the “artivism” at the People Dialogue Festival in Kenya, co-ordinated by Tracey Osogo, who described the project as “a unique platform for meetings between citizens and elected representatives”, where debates on corruption could begin with music sessions. “Involving art in the discussion makes it possible to tackle difficult subjects and encourage people who have never spoken in public in their lives to express their views more freely,” she said.

Taking part in the Lab as a discussant, Cemal Baş, Congress Spokesperson on Environment and Climate Change, also cited the example of artistic collaboration between peoples which offered a glimpse of “another possible history” of peaceful and fruitful relations between different cultures and religions. Željko Vuksa-Fejzic, Congress youth delegate from Bosnia and Herzegovina, put questions to the presenters and stressed the need for participants, including young people in particular, to take ownership of their projects’ objectives.

During the debate, the speakers emphasised that traumatic relationships between communities remained complex and hard to change. According to Prakash Bhattarai, “it is important clearly to identify the problems and their origins” so as to achieve satisfactory outcomes, while Mr Poric stressed the need also to “set realistic objectives that match the real needs of communities.”

In conclusion, Ms Bertholle praised the high standard of the discussions and of the three projects in the running for the WFD Democracy Innovation Award. Noting the Latin origins of the word “complexity”, which referred to the idea of “weaving together”, she expressed her optimism about the effectiveness of the joint efforts for peace between international organisations and civil society.