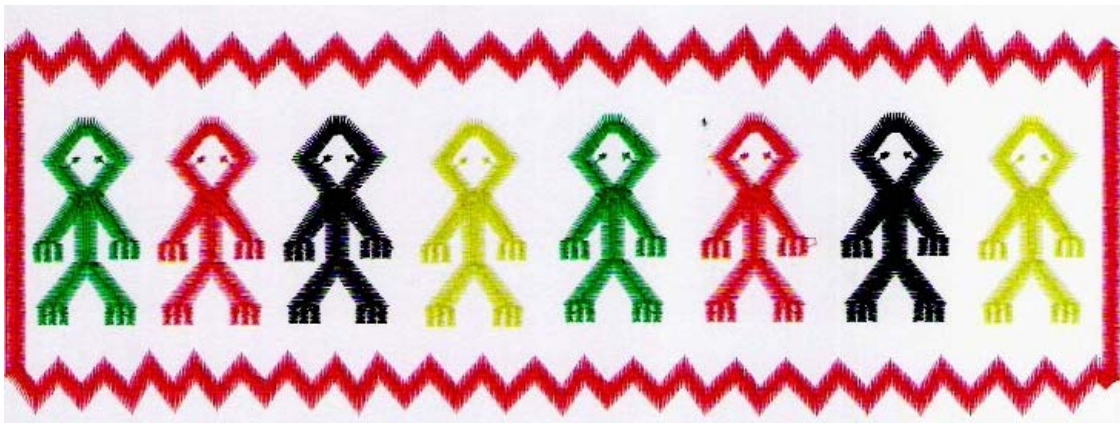




Young People and the Dialogue among Civilizations,
Cultures, and Peoples:
Intercultural and
Interfaith Dialogue to Ensure Peace

**Connecting Youth
From Dialogue to Action**

REPORT



("Fithikiotika", Traditional Cypriot Embroidery)

Cyprus, 16th -19th November 2006

We, the Euro-Mediterranean delegates representing National Commissions for UNESCO and youth led organizations have come from all over the region to participate in the UNESCO Euro-Med Youth Forum on “Young People and the Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures, and Peoples: Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue to Ensure Peace.”

Over 50 delegates from 34 countries, together with 15 observers and 9 facilitators have met in Cyprus between the 16th and 19th of November, 2006 to explore Intercultural and Interfaith (ICIF) issues and determine their possible impact on society. We engaged ourselves in promoting ICIF dialogue and evaluating its potential to influence public and political discourses, and, eventually, to contribute to fostering peace and tolerance.

Inspired by a variety of background documents, we proceeded to reflect on the subject and undertake in-depth discussions on the three focus areas chosen for this forum:

- The role of communication and media in facilitating or hampering intercultural and interfaith dialogue
- Intercultural and Interfaith Values: Shared values and culturally and faith specific values (universalism vs. cultural relativism): does the opposition exist?
- Deligitimizing violence through intercultural and interfaith dialogue

The synergy and inter-dependency of these three sub themes, which were the outcome of a six-week, youth-led online discussion, formed the substance of our debates. After having thoroughly analyzed the dynamics of ICIF dialogue and all related issues, we hereby submit a series of recommendations to UNESCO, policy-makers, opinion leaders, social actors and young people on how to promote ICIF dialogue to ensure peace.

Adopting Dialogue and Renouncing Violence as an Option

We agree that violence in all its forms and manifestations – physical, psychological, etc. – should be renounced at all costs and should not be a means to resolve differences. Violence is often seen as an easy option or even the only option in many conflict situations. However, we, as young people, believe that violence serves only direct and short-term ends.

What begins as lack of knowledge or misunderstanding degenerates into a spiral of fear and desperation. This is often made worse by inequitable

distribution of tangible and intangible resources and the manipulation of ethno-centrist and religious sentiments by leaders to achieve political purposes.

We, the Euro-Med delegates, affirm that dialogue is the best way to manage ICIF conflicts. Dialogue is sometimes seen as ineffective, and more often than not, inefficient. Indeed, it may be a longer, more difficult path, but it affords durable and long-term results.

Dialogue can shatter both historical and current stereotypes and illusions. It renders the other side better understood and less abstract, more human and therefore less menacing.

Through dialogue, conflicts can be reframed and approached critically and cooperatively. Seen under a new light, conflict situations can lend themselves to win-win arrangements.

In an effective dialogue, parties should be mutually critical without being adversarial, should see issues from each other's perspective, and should not seek to fully convince each other of one's respective views. Furthermore, dialogue should aim at dealing with differences and embracing universal values in cultures through *evolution* not *revolution*.

Enhancing Media's Social Responsibility

We, young people, would like to encourage media at all levels to facilitate ICIF dialogue.

We commit ourselves to using the new possibilities for interactivity, provided by technological development, to engage citizens in the process of reporting information and framing it. This would give people ownership over their primary sources of information and the ability to benefit from the media's impact.

While the recent emergence of interactive journalism, like blogs and eye-witness news coverage, as a common practice in media circles holds great promise for the increased involvement of non-professionals, it becomes ever more important to ascertain the reliability of sources and the quality of the provided information.

Possessing a tremendous amount of influence, the media have been given credit for generating new ideas and social change, informing and educating their

audiences whilst promoting local culture through their various means. It is this very power that should be channeled to assist international efforts in ICIF issues.

At the same time, the media have been exploited to convey and perpetuate biases, thereby worsening existing conflicts in society. By resorting to manipulative tactics, media run the risk of losing credibility. Media coverage should be as objective and plural as possible and should avoid any intolerant discourse or propaganda.

The freedom of the media must be respected, but this also entails a duty towards society. The media should wield their power with social responsibility. In this regard, it has become necessary to ensure that media play a constructive role in shaping good citizens and affecting state and corporate policies. They should endorse universal human values, raise awareness, promote tolerance, encourage civic activism, and foster ICIF dialogue.

On the other hand, media users also bear an amount of responsibility in the way they react to the information presented to them. In this regard, the users must be educated to be critical towards what they receive from the media.

Fostering Intercultural and Interfaith Values

We, the Euro-Med delegates, perceive that interactions on a global level require the recognition of universal values, which transcend religious, cultural, ethnic, and other distinctions. These values are derived from a fundamental understanding between the people of the world as is evident in the UN Declaration of Human Rights and relevant documents.

We would like to stress the crucial role that youth organizations can play in disseminating universal values, taking into account cultural and religious sensitivities. Youth organizations can reinforce respect for diversity but will also make obvious to people of different backgrounds that they *can* and *do* share similar, or even identical, values. Our experience is that differences between cultures are not to be perceived as a deterrent to reaching an understanding.

We underscore the value of diversity and the importance of maintaining a “learning attitude” when faced with cultural and religious differences. Conflicts often appear in human relations, and dialogue does not seek to erase differences but only to change mutual perceptions. Even if conflicts cannot be fully resolved, they should be managed. In fact, we, young people, believe that cultures may actually be enriched both by differences and by the process of conflict management itself.

I. Recommendations

We, young people, reaffirm the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights (1993):

“All human rights are universal, indivisible, and interdependent and interrelated... while the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind. It is the duty of states regardless of their political, economic, and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

We urge Governments, UNESCO, international organizations, civil society, youth-led organizations, and the private sector to take actions in the following fields:

1. Training, Education and Awareness

- Organize regional and international UNESCO conferences and on-going training programs for teachers, future teachers, youth workers and youth trainers.
- Ensure the promotion of and wider accessibility to multicultural festivals and summer camps where young people worldwide can have the opportunity to enhance their own culture and learn about other cultures through an interactive environment.
- Provide training to youth NGOs and young people on how to develop effective media relations and how to promote their agenda to media actors on all levels.
- Introduce changes to the educational system adopting non-formal education methodology within the framework of fostering multicultural interaction and tolerance, providing opportunities for the involvement of students themselves, as well as parents, NGOs, and policy-makers.
- Introduce awareness programs about cultural diversity through youth networks and NGOs, in the framework of non-formal education.
- Invite religious leaders to join training and interfaith dialogue sessions on the linkages between human rights and religion.

- UNESCO should sponsor computer and internet education programs, for us, as the youth in the Euro-Mediterranean area but also the youth in the developing world, in order to reduce the digital divide, i.e. unequal access to information.
- Encourage the establishment of more youth exchange programs between culturally diverse areas in order to increase intercultural knowledge.
- Invite academics to develop intellectual frameworks through which one can conceptualize and analyze intercultural and interfaith dialogue and their influence on policy-related activities, including behavioural typologies, effectiveness criteria, and critical points in the policy process, in cooperation with regional and international organizations working in the field.
- Set guidelines for designing educational material in a culturally sensitive manner.
- Ensure that students are given the necessary intellectual skills to treat media messages using a critical approach.
- Hold workshops for young people in order to help them develop interpersonal communication skills, especially within the context of ICIF interactions.
- Sponsor art and media initiatives like travelling theatre groups that present educational plays that touch upon human rights and diversity issues.
- Train young people to convey their ideas to the public through opinion leaders.
- Promote informal methods of discussion using culture, drama, dancing and sport to encourage a wider range of young people, such as those who are socially and financially excluded, to participate in the dialogue.
- Provide society-wide education on the importance of dialogue and the efficient use of this tool.

2. Youth Empowerment Through Networking

- Unite the youth-related efforts of all the various UN agencies under one umbrella organization, which will serve as primary coordinator and reference point for these projects.
- Promote greater involvement of youth in politics and policy-making processes.
- Encourage or organize regional and local drawing or essay-writing competitions for youth around the world, under the aegis of UNESCO, dealing with ICIF dialogue or related themes.
- Launch campaigns to promote the mobilization and social engagement of youth as “global citizens”.
- Lobby governments in the developed world to sponsor the purchase of low-cost computers that do not run on electricity and which were recently put on the market (\$100/unit). These devices should be distributed to underprivileged communities in the developing world that do not have access to information technology and by default should contain UNESCO materials that would promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue.
- Compile an online database, managed by one or more members of the Euro-Med Youth Forum, of successful projects and best practices related to ICIF dialogue. This can serve as a guide for the National Youth Councils, and other organizations, to implement these best practices.

3. Media

- Reaffirm the UNESCO Executive Board’s decision regarding the “Respect for Freedom of Expression and Respect for Sacred Beliefs and Values and Religious and Cultural Symbols” (174 EX/42; 174 EX/48 Part II).
- Promote the creation of open-source media.
- Recommend best practices, under the aegis of UNESCO, for the portrayal of ICIF issues in the media.
- Forge partnerships between UNESCO and strategic entities like academic institutions and entertainment facilities to assist in

diffusing information on ICIF dialogue, e.g. children's channels, NGOs, universities, etc.

- Encourage NGOs to carry public debates on media in their community in order to inform the people about the policy-making process.
- Solicit the UNESCO National Commissions to promote further media education within their national curriculum.
- Create an international network of journalists who work to present a series of critical issues and commit themselves to the goal of promoting ICIF dialogue. Such a network should bring together their different points of views, and set certain standards that they must abide by.
- Use the Geneva and Tunis Declarations on information societies as inspiration in the integration of information technology in ICIF dialogue.
- Develop UNESCO national strategies to encourage national media in each country to produce and distribute materials such as documentary movies that will promote tolerance of different cultures.
 - Hold public screenings of these movies and organize a debate with young participants using the themes, concepts and issues brought up in those movies.
- Organize meetings between decision-makers and young people on TV, radio, web, etc.
- Sponsor the production of sitcoms and soap operas on tolerance, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, sexism and other forms of discrimination and violence targeting youth and aiming to disseminate positive social messages.
- Support youth movements that produce artistic works and media films that deal with social issues and involve children in role-playing and performance.

- Sponsor a program, using existing structures, to put youth into training positions in media organizations (TV, radio, newspapers, etc.) in order to increase youth participation.
- Create an online interactive digital newspaper to encourage debate on current issues.
- Create a UNESCO media “white list” for media outlets that uphold ethics and norms of objectivity, offer balanced reporting, dedicate space to intercultural dialogue and understanding and employ proper methods of dealing with offensive reporting.
- Award the media outlets that excel in the norms mentioned under the preceding point with the “UNESCO Media Award”, on an annual basis.

II. PROJECTS

A. Sequential Structure

- Ensure that any dialogue projects that will be backed by the Euro-Med Youth Forum participants shall follow this formal sequential structure:
 - Institute **trust-building mechanisms** in order to ensure that the actors in the conflict have developed a sufficient amount of mutual trust and social capital in order to have a constructive dialogue.
 - Establish and disseminate to the actors a **blueprint or framework for dialogue** – a set of rules and guidelines to direct interactions among the actors and make sure they are as productive as possible. Such rules should be inspired by best practices in interpersonal communication and should take into account cultural sensitivities and language gaps.
 - Ensure that sensitive and critical topics are not touched upon among the actors until a sufficient amount of trust has been built and until the framework for dialogue is established and disseminated. It should be understood that the positive outcomes of dialogue are sustainable only when there is trust, tolerance, and a mutually observed code for communication.

- Elaborate a feedback mechanism in order to optimize the structure and to define best practices.

B. Supported Project(s)

- We strongly support the running program “The Olive Route” as a best practice for intercultural and interfaith dialogue and we reaffirm the participation of youth as a step in the right direction in order to achieve the best and most durable outcomes (see Annex).
- We urge for the listserv created within the scope of the Euro-med Forum to remain online. As such it can act as the ultimate platform for the creation of the UNESCO media “white list”, for the compilation of an online database of successful projects and best practice related to ICIF dialogue. It is hoped that the listserv will consolidate the partnerships entered into during the conference and be fully utilized by all participants. In the mean time it can serve as a general guide for future youth delegates in youth forums to come. Consequently, each subsequent youth forum logically and cumulatively builds upon the insights and the results of former conclusions.
- We encourage the organization of Model UN Conferences throughout the world and the promotion of such initiatives for young people.