

25.03.2009. From 19 to 24 March 2009 an international seminar "**In Quest of Intercultural Dialogue: Youth and Religion in Europe**" by the Association of Scouts of Azerbaijan took place in Baku and Guba cities of Azerbaijan. It was done with partnership with the European and Eurasian Scout regions, International Union of Muslim Scouts and Norway-Azerbaijan Scout Cooperation project with support of the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norwegian Youth Council, Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Ministry of Youth and Sport of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The project was a timely effort to bring together active youth leaders, trainers, youth workers, researchers and other stakeholders to explore contemporary challenges faced by young people from different religious groups in Europe and test in practice how the different training modules could address those challenges in a systematic way. This event did also provide a framework for analysis of religion's role in broader peace/gender education thus drawing a comparative line between European societies. Participants did actively engage in exploring the dilemmas facing young people with ultimate objective to contribute to peace education and facilitate intercultural and inter-religious learning. This project initiative was timely important of its nature for Azerbaijan and entire region, well known for extraordinary religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity, as well as for its geopolitical strategic location and abundant natural resources. It did also fit well into concept of celebrating Baku as 2009 Islamic Capital City, thus posed a tremendous opportunity for participants to learn, understand and exchange about Islam in the context of European value system. The program of the seminar covered four busy days, excluding arrival and departure dates of participants. As designed originally, the methodology of the seminar was specifically developed to facilitate an exchange of experiences and challenges faced by young people in relation to religion, inter-religious / intercultural learning, peace, gender as well as to draw examples of good practice in the context of social cohesion. The seminar had an enriching format of plenary sessions combined with thematic working groups, religious site visits and practical workshops where the experiences and concerns of young people were discussed in-depth. The project was built on principles of non-formal education utilizing educational and training methodology of the CoE's Directorate of Youth and Sport, scouting methods and clearly had an in-built component of intercultural learning and active participation of all participants.

Seminar objectives were:

- To promote inter-religious dialogue among young people and to address the role of religion in young people's lives;
- To explore the effective ways of handling the conflicts and promotion of the democratic values among young people as a guarantee of peace;
- To reflect upon the state of the intercultural and inter-religious tolerance among young people as a pre-condition for the 'culture of peace';
- To initiate a media campaign for promoting the values of peace particularly targeting young people in the target regions;
- To reflect upon peace value system of young people from the cultural concept of Islam, Christianity, Caucasus, Europe and Globalization.
- To propose measures for political and educational action aimed at increasing understanding and respect for religious diversity among young people in the Europe.

We are proud to indicate that the evaluation findings by participants confirmed meeting all original objectives, thus did help to establish successful institutional linkages and contributed to public awareness through promoting thematic photo exhibition by youth. Young people were key contributors at all stage of the program, which was highly remarked as best practice by external guests and observers.

The program was particularly designed to contribute and enhance the intercultural and inter-religious learning of participants, which manifested itself by experience of cultural exchange itself, joining unique pre-Islamic Novruz festivities in Azerbaijan, international thematic evenings and cultural site visits. Participants themselves enriching that part by actively engaging and sharing on the various aspects of their own cultures, including cultural behavioral coding patterns, stereotypes, attitudes and reflected how all these translates into youth work and democratic processes. The project was uniquely enriching for participants coming from various religious backgrounds by visiting church, synagogue and mosque. An outstanding team of youth trainers did add significant value to the program by successfully adopting methodologies, including presentations, group and panel discussions, debates and small group exercises, learning games and, of course, international cultural evening.

It was driven by desire to facilitate sincere dialogue and debate around challenges faced by young people and draw findings into youth work following the project. Religious leaders, guests and experts did adequately respond to participants' questions and contributed to the discussions. Council of Europe materials (including those on inter-religious dialogue), WOSM publications and case studies were used in the program. Participants were coming from Georgia, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Norway, Russia and Azerbaijan.

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