

THE NIWANO PEACE FOUNDATION
THE FINAL REPORT OF ACTIVITY GRANTS
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2011

Title of the project:

European Project for Interreligious Learning, Training Seminar of the new Academic Team for the Study Course III

Organization/official title:

European Project for Interreligious Learning, EPIL

Name:

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1. Purpose of the Activity:

Purpose of the overall project - the EPIL two years Study and Training Course 2011 - 2013 - is to harness and strengthen the capacities of women of different faiths (and cultures) to live together peacefully and with respect and active promotion of human rights and social harmony. The project has been in existence since 2002. It focusses on Christian-Muslim relations, as Muslims are the largest religious minority in most European countries and relations are potentially conflictive. On the other hand both, Islam and Christianity have strong traditions and religious teachings that emphasize the priority of peace with justice in human/social relations.

EPIL is convinced that peace needs to be made real in the everyday situations where people live and work. Popular prejudice concerning Islam is still widespread in many European countries and fosters fundamentalism and a climate of mistrust on all sides. More knowledge is needed, more competence in dealing with difference, more respect of the other, and also new concepts of how multicultural and multireligious societies can function. EPIL makes a contribution to addressing these needs by strengthening the competence and skills of women who often have the task of organising life in family and neighbourhood and to care for social relations, while at the same time they are hardly present in interreligious dialogues.

Doing this EPIL puts special emphasis on the transfer of what has been learned into the practical (professional) situations of students. By visiting, analysing and discussing good practice examples EPIL has been creating a pool of ideas and concrete possibilities from which students can draw inspiration and get to know concrete models. By living together and sharing regular meditation and spiritual life a basis of trust is slowly growing. The diploma projects of EPIL students are related to their life and work situations in religious education, teaching, medicine, journalism and others. Students develop and reflect their own specific project related to their work place.

EPIL works towards a change of the social and political climate, to move from a more antagonistic situation to a situation of mutual trust (which includes also to work for recognition and equal rights of "the other").

The project is devised as a Roaming College that goes to where particular questions and problems arise and in this way stands by people and communities struggling to live together peacefully, often acting as a catalyst. The new two year cycle 2011 - 2013 comprises five one week modules that take place in six cities of Europe and the Middle

East. Between modules at least twelve meetings of city based national learning groups deepen the learning process and root it in the different contexts.

So far, two of the modules have already taken place (in Boldern/Zürich and in Vienna), see the attached reports (with pictures); the third module, which will take place in Sarajewo, Zenica and Srebrenica (where EPIL is organising a solidarity visit to the memorial of the massacre of 1995), is fully prepared and will take place in May, 2012. The modules in Amsterdam/Cologne and Beirut are in the stage of preparation.

The purpose of the activity supported by Niwano Peace Foundation, the EPIL Training Seminar that took place from October 15 - 18, 2010, was to train the members of the international and interreligious Academic Team of EPIL: They learned about EPIL's special pedagogy, they received and practiced dialogue training and they discussed and decided how to work together as a team. This training was an essential part of the process, as it anticipated and analysed some of the problems that can arise in a setting of such great diversity: EPIL is an international, interlinguistic, interreligious but also an intergenerational project.

2. Content and method of the activity "EPIL Team Training Seminar"

Past experience has shown that it is essential to have a strong and competent team, conversant with interreligious issues and able to handle complex human situations. A team moreoevr that can work together and where personal conflicts are minimized, thanks to a good and careful division of labour, and respectful ways of dealing with each other.

The whole team comprises 10 persons, one Muslim and one Christian from each module. The entire team attended the training seminar, as well as Module I, for the rest of the modules team members alternate. Project coordinators accompany and coach throughout the Study course, taking special responsibility on an alternating basis.

This structure allows EPIL to get professionals on a semi-voluntary basis, also younger women (the team and student body has more younger women in the present course). Training is of highest importance for an interreligious, intercultural and intergenerational team. The Training Seminar helped the team to be on the same eye level, and to fine-plan the process together. The short term effect was an enhanced quality of the study course as a whole.

In terms of content the Training Seminar followed several lines, reflecting the approach of EPIL as a whole:

- **cognitive learning**: it worked around a keynote lecture by EPIL's past president, Prof. Dr. Ulrich Becker on the theme "Towards a Pedagogy of Diversity". Diversity was understood as a positive concept in societies that were moving from a more homogenous understanding of identity to a more heterogeneous one (due to globalisation and internationalisation of labour).
- **dialogue training**, working with a concept of dialogue influenced by diversity discourses
- **participatory team building**: working with processes and methods that would enhance communication and joint leadership in an intercultural/interreligious team
- **principles of choice** for good practice examples/local encounters, visits, etc.
- **planning of cooperation** among the team throughout the course
- **dealing with the interreligious element**: theological, spiritual and cultural elements and how to analyse and deepen them.

The Training Seminar has laid the ground for the entire study course and has created lines of cooperation between the members who are very dispersed and only meet at modules.

In the longer term it contributed to creating a pool of experts trained in innovative approaches to interreligious learning. All team members are highly qualified and among them have the skills necessary to provide leadership for the course. They are all linked to various networks (university institutes, Christian or Muslim women's organisations and institutions, etc) and thus broaden the EPIL network .

3. Course of Actual Events

Team Training Seminar

The seminar took place October 15 - 18, 2010 at the Boldern Protestant Academy near Zürich/Switzerland. The October date was indicated in our application, it had to be taken because of the availability of the lecturers.

In the days of the seminar the following issues were taken up:

3.1. Basis for our work together:

- respect difference
- take into account that we all work in a foreign language (English)

- no one has missionary intentions
- we want to be fair and support each other

3.2. Sharing of competences in:

- adult education, pedagogy, didactics
- knowledge of religion and interreligious dialogue
- awareness of feminist approaches/gender issues
- cultural sensitivity

It is important that among ourselves we have these competences. The seminar worked in depth on competences, in order to create a kind of map who would be responsible for what.

3. 3. Knowledge of EPIL and its partner organisations:

- How EPIL works
- leadership, role of coordinators/team/local partners
- Organisation of the Study Course, the modules, Learning groups, expectations concerning diploma work, etc.

3. 4. Methodology of the EPIL study course

- dialogue training
- methods of consensus building
- visits and travels as a method
- the role of classical (academic) learning

3. 5. Towards an EPIL pedagogy

Based on a lecture by Prof. Becker the seminar discussed the following issues which play a role in the EPIL Study Course:

- gender/feminist perspective
- theological assumption, "Theology of Religions"
- intercultural aspects of the project: the use of English as a project language, economic/educational differences
- hospitality and "convivencia" (good and peaceful living together) as open and non - hierarchical concepts.

3. 6. Familiarization with every module and studying the module planning process

The seminar was presented with drafts of programmes of every module, and discussed these as well as ways of working together; also it discussed further tasks, such as:

- working on/updating the reader for each module
- ways of working in the learning groups

- accompanying and evaluating diploma work
- process of student recruitment
- administrative questions: minimum honoraria

The seminar was a very intensive process, too short but nonetheless it achieved the underlying purpose of creating a functioning team with knowledge of the basic processes and of stirring the enthusiasm of all team members that have since worked together well in two modules.

4. Achievements:

33 women students enrolled in EPIL Course III. “Why do you want to join EPIL” we had asked in the application form. One of the most commonly mentioned response was the following: “EPIL will help us gain knowledge about our religions, about other religions, and help us understand better our interreligious and intercultural contexts. We like the combination of cognitive and experiential learning.”

EPIL is also a continuing education process for the Academic Team (AT) members. Although AT are accomplished women working in different professional fields, yet by taking part in the management of the course, accompanying the students, organizing events, the AT deepen their understanding of identity and difference in complex human situations (described in item 2). The AT also enriches its knowledge and experience by sharing with their co-team members and the co-directors and by learning from them. It is therefore, a mutual learning experience.

One of the important achievements of the Team Training Seminar was that it eliminated competition between the religious and sociocultural contexts of team members. As His Holiness Aram I wrote about EPIL recently, *“EPIL is a ground-breaking project that brings together Christian and Muslim women to promote inter-religious understanding; it converts prejudice into informed respect for difference and lays the foundations for a future society based on trust and mutual support. In other words, it creates sustainable learning communities through its special educational approach.”*

During the training the AT also discussed the evaluation reports of the earlier courses. They highlighted the lessons learned and built goals for achievement for the next course.

Following the seminar, the course proper started in May 2011 and, so far, has achieved

the following:

- The first two modules of the course (Boldern/Zürich and Vienna) are completed. Christian Muslim women have already built relations at city and modules level.
- Students participate in peace-building processes in their societies by attending public events, or, organizing similar events themselves.
- There is a network of women's organizations supporting the work of EPIL because of their conviction. They help EPIL to go on inspite of the economic crisis and the fact that EPIL has to functions on a shoe-string budget. In Vienna women belonging to Christian and Muslim women's organizations, did the catering for the students themselves to save money!
- Both in Zürich and Vienna, EPIL organized public events during the module, and the media (eg. Austrian TV ORF I) covered it as a pioneering project for women's advocacy.
- Students will present their diploma projects. Some of these projects will cover important issues related to the status of women, or, promoting conviviality among people of different faiths.

While it will not be possible to give a full list of achievements because the course is still running, it would be worth to mention what has EPIL achieved:

EPIL's pedagogy and approach to issues has proven the credibility of the approach. The course of events mentioned in section 3 has shown to be another way of discussing some of the urgent issues touching women such as: Violence against women, refugee women, gender and power, women, religion and culture, women and environment etc.

Achievements through diploma projects as models of peace-building among women and between communities should also mentioned. We would like to share with you three examples from former courses:

- A public school project for Christian and Muslim students and their parents in Zürich (Switzerland)
- An analysis of children's publications by religious communities: Promoting conviviality, or, animosity? (Lebanon)
- An analysis of names in Christianity and Islam: Cultural similarity, or, religious undertones? (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Both co-directors are often solicited to present EPIL in different contexts: UN Human

Rights Council (Geneva), NGOs working on interfaith and intercultural issues, Foundations, Academic Institutions (Danube University Austria, and Webster University Geneva Campus) Women's Organizations (Global Peace Initiative for Women (New York), the Interreligious Conference of European Women Theologians, IKETH, the Swiss Interreligious Thinktank, ITT, Church Institutions and other women's associations in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon. (Some of the papers could be available upon request).

EPIL staff is also invited to contribute chapters to books edited on similar themes by third parties. Co-director Reinhild Traitler received the Award of the German Gratia Foundation for special merits in interreligious education in 2010.

5. Future Prospects:

As an independent non-profit project, the leadership needs to raise funds constantly. Therefore, while the importance of the project is not questioned, EPIL's future will depend on availability of funds.

The only concrete project at the moment is a book project to be prepared by the two co-directors of EPIL with input from the wider constituency. However, the Board is planning a thorough evaluation of EPIL III, and possibilities for continuation.

Annex: Brief reports of modules I & II, with pictures.