

Africa e Mediterraneo

Common Values.

The encounter between religions
and secular thinking systems
through comics
for the integration of immigrants.

www.africaemediterraneo.it

Objectives of the project

The project aims to make easier the multi confessional coexistence between immigrants and receiving communities.

The project has the specific purpose to highlight the points of convergence between different (secular and religious) thought systems, identified by some experts in religions, social and philosophical studies, and to convey them through a communication action (5 comics and a course book for schools, to be advanced through a well-aimed delivery).

Project description

The "Common values" project took its first step a few years ago from a clear idea: communicating the existence of some fundamental values which are at the basis of all major religions and of secular thought. This idea seemed to gain more and more relevance in Europe, where the migratory flows made and make the confrontation with foreign cultures increasingly dire, in a world that has to face the unexpected return of the sacred, together with deep religious conflicts.

From the very beginning we have decided to suggest to follow a path through the common values of all citizens of tomorrow's Europe: youths, especially teenagers and pre-teenagers. In order to communicate these concepts in a catchy and attractive way, we have chosen comic art.

Thanks to the support of the European Commission, which has funded the project including it in the INTI-Integration programme for migrants, a partnership of Italian, Spanish, French and Belgian organisations has started a multi subject work backed by a scientific committee and by a team which included European and African authors, artists and experts in intercultural didactics and in dialogue among religions. These are the partners of the project: Lai momo (Italy) and Eurodialog (Belgium) – project leaders – Africa e Mediterraneo (Italy), L’Afrique dessinée (France), Le Comptoir (Belgium), Translit (Spain), Grupo Comunicar (Spain).

Forgiveness as the highest form of love, non-violence, respect for the other, sharing, and non-discrimination: these are the five values which various religions and secular thought have in common. After being located, they have inspired five stories, transformed then into scripts for comics albums, whose fulfilment has been committed to professional drawers of the association L’Afrique dessinée. The comic albums have been published together with a didactic guide, whose aim is to supply teachers with some tools and materials useful to handle the comics in the didactic work.

The publications in three languages (Italian, French and Spanish) have been distributed in Italy, France, Belgium and Spain, thanks to the involved partners’ contacts and issuers.

In some schools of the four partner countries, various didactic experiments have been developed, including comics workshops, activities and debates on common values and related issues. Moreover, an exhibition of the comics, which goes over their stories and delves into matters analysed in the guide, has been conceived. The first exhibition has been realised in Padua, in the old stables of Palazzo Moroni, from 5 to 14 December 2005. Some other set ups are going to be presented in Bologna in 2006.

Social context

The “Common values” project addresses a Europe which is discovering that it has become a multi-confessional as well as a multi-cultural community. The European society has nowadays to face questions related to the peaceful coexistence on its territory, of groups with different religious cultures and backgrounds. This phenomenon is essentially derived from the definitive settling of migrant families and from the reaching of adult age by born-in-Europe generations. These young people are presently the most affected by social integration difficulties. It’s the everyday experience of their social identity rejection that often drives them to reclaim the right to live, through public actions, a religion which they take possession of as a fundamental dimension of their social and cultural identity.

We have ascertained how every religion and every secular conception shares with others some moral values, whose knowledge can promote reciprocal respect and social cohesion. We have then considered that all these ideas, if rightly/opportunately spread through a communication system accessible to everyone as comic art, may become the common denominator of reciprocal respect in the European society.

Methodologies

During the project's realisation we have followed a methodology based on:

1. The use of comics, one of the most effective and communicative applied arts, to reach a teenage public.
2. The previous experiences of Africa e Mediterraneo in the field of African comics (Africa e Mediterraneo Award for the best African comics, Africa comics collection) have allowed to check out the great capabilities of this media, deriving from its being, a completion of texts and images, a sequential art that can represent ideas using all the literary expedients together with the strength of the images.
3. The collaboration with Africa comics drawers who, as migrants themselves, communicate the intercultural message with special sensitivity and involvement.
4. A multi-disciplinary approach: we intended to make the different subjects which pick out religion as study matter interact. Therefore, besides the theologians, we entrusted literary men of different origins and religious beliefs, scholars of social sciences and rights and comics artists, fellow members themselves of the foreign groups who settled in Europe.

Critical points and applied solutions

The main critical point of the project development was related to the difficulty of reconciling a high-quality, creative job with the need to work out a social and philosophical "message". Our expertise in projects with social purposes realised through art has anyway allowed us to foresee this difficulty since the very first phase of presentation of the project to the European Commission.

Since we started elaborating the stories, the risk of a trivial or too didactic outcome was clear; that is the reason why we entrusted the expertise of accomplished authors, particularly sensitive to this kind of issues and used to addressing a young public, such as P. Fonteneau, A. Waberi, C. Norac and T. Gunzig. These authors of novels and short stories are in fact able to write "true" stories with all the elements necessary to outline a coherent narrative dimension.

Moreover, writers, script-writers and drawers had to face the imposition of time limits, for their work depends strictly on inspiration and is hardly programmable in controlled pre-established times.

In order to solve these troubles, what has been essential was the work of continuous dialogue, discussion and revision done by every different involved participant. Since the beginning the scientific committee, composed by religion and international politics experts, has given a fundamental contribution: these specialists have carried out some comprehensive studies and some elaborate discussions on such complex issues as the dialogue between religions and secular thought. Besides this consultancy, some comics experts of the review "Fumo di china" have been continuously revising the publications, supervising the quality of the comics, paying special attention to their artistic and communicative characteristics.

Interaction with partners (communities, public or private institutions, others) and Financing - fundraising strategies

Since the beginning this project has required the cooperation of different actors, who have combined their various skills in order to warrant a good outcome for the project. Lai momo and Africa e Mediterraneo have coordinated the whole work, especially taking care of the publishing and pedagogical facets of the project. In Belgium the partner Comptoir has mainly attended to relations with writers, while Eurodialog has taken care of the contacts with the European Commission and has dealt with the promotion and diffusion of publications for the French-speaking area. L'Afrique dessinée, an association of African comics drawers who have migrated to Europe, has been an essential "artistic" partner. Spanish partners Translit and Grupo Comunicar have both coordinated the actions of the project in Spain. In addition to the partners, the Scientific Committee and the editorial staff of Fumo di China, have been actively cooperating at every phase of the project.

As far as funding is concerned, the European Commission (General Direction Justice Freedom and Security) has represented the main financier of the project: through the INTI – Integration of migrants programme it has shelled out 80% of the project's budget.

Finding stocks to co-finance the project, so that we could cover all the expenses, has also been necessary

We have been pursuing this aim mainly in two ways:

1. Quest for private and public funding. We have integrated the project with some activities and presented it to some private foundations and public institutions. We obtained some financing by the Fondazione Carisbo, by the Regione Veneto, by the University of Padua and by the Regione Emilia Romagna. In some cases we have suggested to the financers to plan some additional specific activities, which have allowed a further project's development in local areas.
2. Distribution and sale of publications. A focused publishing strategy is currently being planned, as we are trying to elude the book market's current difficulties.

Evaluation of the project - conclusions

The cooperation with the religion and sociology experts of the scientific committee has assured quality and consistency in the work: in fact they have supervised the artists' approach, analysed the texts' and images' contents to achieve that intercultural homogeneity that was pursued by the project.

We have moreover availed ourselves of the technical consultancy of some editors of the comics criticism's Italian review Fumo di China, who took care of the scripts' review and who have followed up the drawers' work, suggesting modifications and improvements and endorsing the final outcome. We do indeed deem that a project of this kind should turn out to be a high-quality work from the graphic and artistic point of view, and should answer the canons and standards of the comics' expression modality, as well as assure the scientific validity of the contents conveyed.

Moreover we have enacted an evaluation system of the diffusion and didactic experimentation actions of the project, through some questionnaires which have been handed out in schools, aimed to check out the real effectiveness of the publications and of the suggested activities. Both teachers and students have actively cooperated, filling in the questionnaires and some evaluation texts